# ONE-ACT PLAYS

*FROM THE YIDDISH*

SECOND SERIES

*By*

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ABRAHAM RAISEN, F. BIMKO

*Authorized Translation by*
ETTA BLOCK

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*To the best of brothers*

DR. BERNARD KAUFMAN

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# PROLOGUE

## *I, THE THEATER GOER*

BY MOSCHE NADIR

*Translated by Etta Block, by Permission of the "Big Stick," March, 1918*

I am the average theater goer. I am, in the language of the poet, Walt Whitman, "the divine average." I believe in the "divine average" and in its right to govern the world.

I am the average theater goer whom all wish to please. I am he, the exalted Sanhedrin, who is the last word in everything. The dramatist bows before me. The actor prostrates himself in my presence. The impresario has a constant ear cocked in my direction. I am big, strong, mighty, vulgar, vox populish, eternal.

I am the average theater goer. I am the eternal riddle of the theater. All approach me as a world problem, an enigma, a salamander. But I, myself, am perfectly unconcerned. It is all the same with me if the play pleases or does not please. My artistic taste is like a celluloid collar. It can be used on both sides.

I am the average theater goer and I do not go to the theater to think, but to forget. I seek there to forget my wife, the children, the crowded tenement, the littered wash, the bad ventilation. I frequently go out for a walk, just so, out on the avenue and something stirs within me and there is no saloon handy, so I walk into some theater and pres-

ently I find myself seated up-stairs perfectly contented. As long as I am already there I see a play too. What difference does it make to me?

I am the average theater goer and I really do not know what the critics want of me, why they muddle me up so. All I know is that they won't let me get any pleasure out of life. When a play doesn't please me because it is slow, along they come and say it *does* please me, and when a play really does please me because there is dancing and singing in it and it's lively, they come along and say that it doesn't even begin to please me, that it is trash and that it revolts me. In plain words, according to them, plays which please me do not please me because they really please me very much indeed.

To tell the truth I love a play in which no one stands about idle. I love to see when one throws himself down-stairs, when one gets angry and smashes dishes, when there is plenty of noise as at a fair, when one tears at his collar and beats his breast, when one turns up the whites of his eyes and becomes green as grass. I hate to see an actor go about idle or sit on one spot, just so, without snow or hail, without thunder and lightning. I want to see men dressed in armor or in the costumes of wealthy shepherds, who wear little silken chemises and crooked staffs and a silvered hoop on the forehead. On the women I love to see as much exposed as possible because you see I have already been married many years to my own wife and I cannot become unfaithful to her because my earnings are very small.

I am the average theater goer. I do not go to the theater to criticize. I just go to rest my feet a little. The play itself is not important. What is important is that I, who own nothing that is my own, have here a seat which is reserved especially for me and upon which no one else dare sit except I alone. I may stand upon it with both my feet, or sit,

or leave it vacant altogether, or attach underneath it my derby. No one dare say anything to me. It is mine. Just let any one else try and sit down upon it. Should I enter and find some one occupying it, I would not take another seat were the whole theater empty, oh no. I would just say to him, "Hey, you there, just you get up please. I sit here."

I am the average theater goer and I go to the theater myself to play. I go there to meet my countrymen and between us we play our own comedy. They ask me sweetly, "Why don't you come and see us sometimes?" while I hate them as one hates pig. I go to the play because my neighbor goes and my neighbor goes because I go. We both go there because there is no tailors' club or a homey bathhouse where one may go for a bit of a chat with some acquaintance, where one may slap a fellow on the back and say a homely word, crack a homely joke. I go to a heart-rending drama because my boss has deducted a cent-and-a-half a dozen sleeves and my heart is heavy and—and I am ashamed to cry. Therefore, when I see Othello, the Moor, choke his beloved Desdemona, or how Hamlet holds in his hands the skull of his friend Yorick and speaks of life and death, I suddenly recall that they have deducted a cent-and-a-half a dozen sleeves and I cry real tears.

I am the average theater goer and when I am in Thomashefsky's theater and I see on the stage a beautiful room with expensive furniture and chandeliers I feel flattered. I pretend that the well-to-do Thomashefsky has invited me to his house and is showing off his wealth to me, his treasures, and when I recall that I am just a poor fellow, I get so warm around my heart. Here is he, the rich Thomashefsky, who is worth at least a million rendlach. Here is his old mother. Here is his daughter. Here they're drinking tea; now they speak of a broken fiddle; he weeps; he sings; now he goes to take a bath. And all of this costs me but

half a dollar. Isn't it worth it? If another millionaire, Jacob Schiff, for instance, would want a half dollar to show me his house wouldn't I go? And should they show upon the stage a poor house, in which the folks go about covered in rags and tags, I have pleasure also for then I am reminded that after all there are poorer than I and I thank God for that.

I am the average theater goer and the play with all its nonsense bothers me mighty little. As soon as the lights are lowered and there is no other place to look, I look at the stage. The music plays so I listen. They dance, so I think to myself they have healthy feet, not tortured with work like mine. They talk of a nightingale, I fall asleep. It thunders, I wake up. And after it is all over I go home and plan again about opening a pants factory.

I am the average theater goer and I love to see beards, those that can readily be detected as pasted on. I love to see how they drink champagne on the stage and to speculate whether it is real champagne. When I watch them eat real noodles and one rides in on a real horse, it is worth more to me than the whole drama. It seems to me there is no greater art in the whole world and that this is a picture of real life.

I am the average theater goer and when I see how the villain is finally punished in the fourth act and the hero is rewarded I am touched to the heart because you see I am a very honest man, but my neighbor there is a common fellow, a scamp, an outcast, a good-for-nothing.

I am the average theater goer over whom the critics make such a fuss, before whom all bow with such respect. Each one of them has a decided opinion with regard to my opinion, but I have no opinions with regard to myself not even with regard to their opinions about me. I go to the theater because I am lonely, down-hearted or light-hearted,

or because they are playing something from Sholom Asch or Za Zalatarefski, because maybe I earn a lot of money and have no other place to spend it, or because I am going about idle and have no place to go. I like comedies, farces, burlesques, tragedies, Barnum & Bailey's, Luna Park, pointed shoes, seal rings, plump girls, Hamburger steak, King Lear, cemetery, tango, Haman baths, Galli Curci, paprika, etc., etc.

I am the average theater goer and I believe with the poet Walt Whitman in the "divine average," that it rules the world, the seven arts, the skies, love, religion. Do not all the old bachelors, who write criticisms for the papers, believe likewise?

# BEBELE

## *IDYLL*

BY PEREZ HIRSCHBEIN

---

AARON SHLOMAH.
GITEL, *his wife.*
BEBELE, *their daughter.*
SHOLEM MAIER, *Bebele's betrothed.*
EIDEL, *her girl friend.*
LIEBE, *a neighbor.*
A PUPIL.

*Scene: At* AARON SHLOMAH'S. *A small white-washed room. Over the windows are hung spotlessly clean, white curtains. Clear, yellow sand covers the floor. Just after a holiday festival, at twilight.*

AARON SHLOMAH (*at a table in the back-ground with a young boy. They have just finished a lesson in Pentateuch. He pinches the boy's cheek affectionately*)
If you will study the whole term with such zeal, I will love you. I am going to tell your father, then he'll send you to the Yeshivah next year. Would you like to go to the Yeshivah?

THE PUPIL
Yes, rebbe.

[*The voices of children at play are heard through the window.*

AARON SHLOMAH

Tell me the truth, now. Wouldn't you rather play with the boys out there?

THE PUPIL

No, rebbe. I would rather be studying the Torah. I want to be a rabbi.

AARON SHLOMAH

If you're diligent, you'll be a rabbi. Your father will make a wonderful match with you! You will be a great honor to your father.

THE PUPIL

When will we commence on the Gemarah?

AARON SHLOMAH

After this term. I will get you a fellow student, and, with God's help, we will all begin the Gemarah.

GITEL (*comes in*)

You're a fool, as I live. Why do you torture him? Let him run out into the street. Let him play with the other boys. Do you want to stuff the whole Torah into him at one time?

THE PUPIL

I don't want to play. I would rather learn the Torah!

GITEL

A blessing from God, to have such a child! Does your mother know, at least, that you are so eager to learn?

THE PUPIL

She knows.

GITEL (*kisses his cheek affectionately. The child becomes embarrassed and wipes his cheek*)

AARON (*to* GITEL)

Feh, feh, you spoil my scholars for me!

GITEL

Go out, Yankele, go out. That will be enough for you for one day.

AARON SHLOMAH
If you want to go, go. Tell your mother that your teacher studied with you the whole time.

THE PUPIL
I'll tell her. Good day.
[*He goes out.*

GITEL
What more could I have asked if He, who is in Heaven, had not taken my boys from me before their time?

AARON SHLOMAH
Nu, enough, for you—enough! Where is Bebele? Didn't she go with you?

GITEL
Woe to her mother! Where is she, then?

AARON SHLOMAH
I suppose with her girl friend—what do they call her? —with Eidel. They must have gone somewhere.

GITEL
You shouldn't have let the child go out of the house alone!

AARON SHLOMAH
But it is still broad daylight.

GITEL
You forget that she is about to become a bride.

AARON SHLOMAH
No harm will come of it.

GITEL
Your head will ache all right if anything happens to her.

AARON SHLOMAH
Don't be a fool, and don't spill any tears.

GITEL (*looks out of the window—anxiously*)
My Bebele! The sun will soon set. Oh, that Eidel! I cautioned her a thousand times not to take the child out

of the house. At least a thousand times I told her. A girl soon to be a bride! There's a real danger!

AARON SHLOMAH.

I wonder where she goes?

GITEL

The good year knows! Promenading, I suppose, and the whole town looks on!

AARON SHLOMAH (*somewhat relieved, pleased*)

She's in everybody's eye!

LIEBE (*comes in*)

God's help to you!

GITEL

A good year to you, Liebe'sche. Listen to me, Aaron Shlomah. You're going to evening prayers now? If you should see her, tell her that her mother is wearing her eyes out looking for her.

LIEBE

You mean Bebele? I just saw her walking with Eidel. No evil eye—she lit up the whole street!

[*Aaron goes.*

But, anyway, there are evil tongues. They'd like to talk.

GITEL

Don't you suppose I know? The harm they can do me, God forbid, may it come to them!

LIEBE

They say that she isn't a well girl.

GITEL

To whom did they say it?

LIEBE

It was told to Rifka Zelde—that Bebele wasn't a strong girl.

GITEL

May she only remain as strong and healthy! All in all,

she is only seventeen years old. I'm not worrying if she doesn't marry for a while!

LIEBE

God forbid! How you talk! Rifka Zelde merely repeated it to me. She laughed at them in her fists, for who doesn't know that Bebele is a perfectly sound girl?

GITEL (*through her tears*)

If God has already punished me, that from seven only one is left to me, would He punish me still further? I was barely able to save the one through praying and fasting. The whole world knows how dear she is to me! Will you taste the preserves I made yesterday? (*Takes out of the cupboard a jar, covered carefully with a piece of white muslin.*) You must taste it, anyway. Just guess what it it made of?

LIEBE (*takes some and tries it on her tongue*)

Mother mine, why it's John-apple!

GITEL

John-apple it is, Lieb'sche. Some one taught me how to make it.

LIEBE

What a flavor—John-apple—wonderful! Funny, it is preserved and the flavor is still there.

GITEL

There are three apples in this little jar. It cooks down so. And here are cherries from last year yet. Look how fresh they are, just as if they were preserved yesterday.

LIEBE

M'm . . . How firm they are! Now, mine are just a mash. M'm . . . delicious! May your luck be as good, please God! And when do you start on the wedding outfit?

GITEL

After the Sabbath, if God grants me my health. The wed-

ding will be on the fifteenth of Shevat. The child is still growing—the later, the better. My little Bebele! When she comes in, she'll scold me for fasting.

LIEBE

Why, are you fasting today?

GITEL

May she only be spared to me long years. Every Thursday I fast. I have never yet missed a single Thursday since I lost the last of my babies.

LIEBE

What a mother can do!

GITEL

I used to fast Mondays and Thursdays, so he, Aaron Shlomah, took over the Mondays.

LIEBE

I hear this from you for the first time, Gitel'sche. If you had asked the rabbi about it, he would have absolved you from such a vow.

GITEL

Is it then a hardship—for her sake?

LIEBE

And your prayers were heard. Bebele was spared to you. Who knows for whose sins one suffers!

GITEL

My husband, may he live, says the same thing. Who knows, perhaps if I had not undertaken this penance, whether my child would be with her mother today? When the last child died I laid a lock in the grave. Maybe the charm worked and the grave was locked forever. I didn't dare spill one tear! Do you know what it means for a mother not to cry when she lays her baby in the grave? . . .

LIEBE

What worth would we have in the eyes of the Lord if we didn't weep in times of sorrow?

GITEL (*searches for something in the bureau; holds it up*)

Look, curious isn't it, how perfect it is yet after all this time. It has lain here in my bureau, washed and mangled, all these years! Do you know what it is?

LIEBE

Bebele's baby shirt.

GITEL

May you have health and strength! It belonged to the old rebbitzen, his pious mother, may she rest in Paradise. When she died, the women gave it to me, and I made it over for the child. When I tore into the linen my feet trembled.

LIEBE

That is no small matter! She was a pious soul!

GITEL

How strong the linen still is! Bebele wore it for two years and there isn't even the least little hole in it. Just look, out of curiosity.

LIEBE

And to this very day you have never permitted yourself a nap during the day!

GITEL

During the day! I never lie down before midnight! True, I sometimes fall on my nose—one does so much in a day! But to lie down before midnight—God forbid. I have never yet fallen down on my vow! My one regret is that Neche Henneh isn't alive. She would have taken such delight in Bebele! But they are all dead—all the seven pious old wives!

LIEBE

And *that* you did, too!

GITEL

To the seven old women I sold her for eighteen groschen, and old Neche Henneh, the last of them, died two years ago, and she would often say: "Now, she'll live by her own merit, and if I am worthy to sit with the pious on High, I'll never leave Bebele's name off my lips." Who knows, perhaps, it is due to her great merit, may she rest in peace, that I have made such a splendid match for my Bebele!

LIEBE

Does he know, at least—the groom—how dear she is to you?

GITEL

He will, please God, love her. I have faith in God!

LIEBE

He comes of fine parents. He will know how to value her.

GITEL

How can one await the blessed moment? Dear God, what else must I do to deserve that blessing at Your hands? Keep her safe for me! Grant that she may outlive her mother! It is so very hard to keep up such penances! I but ask to live to see one thing, and I can hardly await the moment! How I ache to take her in my arms and kiss her—kiss her. It seems to me when that moment comes, my very life will leave me!

LIEBE

To torture one's self with such penances is altogether too much. I can't understand how one can so restrain himself and not kiss a child. I would, I don't know what—

GITEL

It *is* hard! Very hard! I undertook the penance when she was born. I knew that that would be the hardest thing

for me. When a baby lies in its cradle with its little pink cheeks, how can one restrain himself and not give it a kiss? And after it has nursed at the breast, and fallen asleep with the breast in its little mouth, how can you keep from kissing it on its little mouth as you lay it down? . . . to say nothing when it begins to take its first steps, and utters its first words! My heart was torn with joy! It was the full measure! I bit my lips together—but the child I wouldn't touch!

[*She cries for joy.*

LIEBE

No, I could never have carried it out. (*She cries with* GITEL.) My life is bitter enough without that! When the little one hangs around my neck, looks into my eyes, and says: "Mamma, don't cry," what can I do? I give her a kiss and stop crying.

GITEL

If God will give—after the wedding. . . . Seems to me, I hear her now—well and strong may she be.

[BEBELE *and* EIDEL *come in.*

LIEBE

Here she is, the romp, who causes her mother so much worry. Come, your mother won't give you a kiss, so give here your fat cheeks!

[*She kisses* BEBELE.

BEBELE (*lovable but spoilt. She looks like a girl of not more than fifteen*)

We went for a walk.

EIDEL

Were you worried? We didn't go beyond the town.

GITEL

You did well, my children. Are you not hungry, Bebele?

BEBELE

We had something to eat at Eidel's, didn't we, Eidel?

EIDEL

I'll tell the truth. She didn't want to eat at our house. "My mother is fasting," she said, and that is why she wouldn't eat.

GITEL

What are you talking about, my child! Why should you do what your mother does?

BEBELE

When my mother fasts, then I fast, too.

GITEL

Did you ever! . . . What a child! (*She busies herself at the stove.*) Tell me quickly, my child, what shall I fix for you to eat?

BEBELE

If you'll eat, I will.

GITEL

Ah, let me be, my child. How much is there still left for me to fast yet—about three months.

BEBELE

But the sun has set already.

GITEL

I'll wait, my child, until the stars show in the heavens. Your mother's heart trembles for you today more than usual.

EIDEL

Your husband, Liebe, was on his way home from synagogue.

LIEBE

What you say! And I've been standing here and prattling. Good night.

[*She goes out.*

GITEL

Go in health, Lieb'sche, go. Eidel, taste my citron preserve.

EIDEL

Just enough for the tip of my tongue. . . . Oh, how delicious!

GITEL

And now you take some, Bebele.

BEBELE

When you'll taste it, I will.

GITEL

Don't act that way, my child. Don't force me. Before the stars come out, I'll not take anything in my mouth.

BEBELE

Here, I'll light the lamp, then it'll be night.

EIDEL

Oh, but you're a clever one. Go on, taste the preserves—do, please your mother.

GITEL (*through tears*)

You are causing your mother useless pain.

EIDEL

I'll tell your betrothed. I'll tell on you that you don't mind your mother.

BEBELE

Sholem Maier knows that I don't mind my mother. (*Teasing her mother by putting out her cheek temptingly to her to be kissed.*) Give me a kiss, and I'll eat.

GITEL (*pushes her playfully and gently away from her*)

Go on—you aggravate your mother. Before the wedding, one should obey a mother. Just ask Eidel if that isn't so.

BEBELE

And just for that I'll give you a kiss, and then you'll have something to remember me by. (*She playfully forces her mother down on the bed, clasps her arms around her neck and kisses her warmly.*) Now, that's what you do to a mother who doesn't kiss her child! That's what you get for never kissing her.

GITEL (*tries to defend herself*)
Go away, I tell you.

EIDEL
You crazy thing! Let your mother go. Look how your hair is mussed. You look like a gypsy.

BEBELE
I'll do the same thing to you pretty soon.
[*Runs over to her and tousles her hair.*

EIDEL
Let me be.

BEBELE
That's what mother should have done. That's how she should have kissed my cheeks. . . . Oh, I'm so tired! Look out of the window! The stars are out. . . . Oh, I feel so happy! You can eat now, mother. The stars are out already.
[*She lights the lamp.*

EIDEL
But it is so early. It is light outside yet. I wouldn't light the lamp. (*She puts out the light*)

GITEL
Stop your mischief! Enough now, enough. Tell me better, where you've been.

BEBELE
Don't tell, Eidele.

GITEL
You surely wouldn't go where you shouldn't. Then why are you afraid to tell?

BEBELE
If you want to, tell; but I'll be angry if you do.

EIDEL
We'll make up before your wedding.

BEBELE
*You're* ashamed to tell, too.

EIDEL

But you took me there yourself! Why should I be afraid to tell?

BEBELE (*runs over to her and covers her mouth with her hand*)

Don't tell. I'll hate you!

EIDEL (*pushes her hand away forcibly from her mouth*)

We were up in the women's gallery of the synagogue!

BEBELE

Don't tell! Don't tell!

GITEL

What did you do in the women's gallery?

EIDEL

We stole in to watch Sholem Maier studying.

BEBELE (*hides her face in embarrassment in* EIDEL'S *lap*)

Go—I hate you! I'm going to be mad with you forever. I'm never going to talk to you any more.

EIDEL

She took me there, herself. We looked through the curtained-railing in the east wall and saw him standing at the Holy Ark in the corner, with his face to the wall, swaying over the Gemarah.

BEBELE

I hate you! I hate you!

GITEL

You crazy girl! Why shouldn't one tell a mother? Don't you think a mother wants to hear nice things about her child's betrothed? Of course, I take great pride in it, if he sits and studies the Holy Torah. Your father says that he is a great scholar, and, that in time, he may be a rabbi.

[BEBELE *raises her head and is lost in thought.*

EIDEL

Are you still angry with me, Bebele?

BEBELE

I suppose you'll tell *him*, too, that I go to the women's gallery to watch him study. Honest, mother, isn't it nice for me to go there?

GITEL

Of course, it's not nice. Some one may see you.

BEBELE

What can I do if I want to see him sometimes? Before the wedding you say it isn't nice for the man to see the girl.

EIDEL

If he lived in another town, you could write him letters. Oh, that would be fine!

BEBELE

It is nice to write letters. Father would teach me to make a "shin" with a little curlicue. "Sholem" begins with a "shin." (*Upon a sudden thought.*) And just because you told my mother where we went, I'll not show you the little tefillin bag I am making for him.

EIDEL

If you don't show, then I won't need to look.

GITEL

Don't be foolish, my child, and show her what you have embroidered.

BEBELE (*takes out of the bureau, where she has hidden it deep down, a little velvet bag, embroidered in red thread*)

EIDEL

Oh my! You embroidered that and didn't even show me? You, Gitel, should tell Bebele that I'm better to her than she is to me.

GITEL

Not once have I told her! That's because you spoil her.

BEBELE

Are you really angry with me? Well, forgive me. Let's

be friends. (*Referring to the bag.*) Do you like it?

EIDEL

Of course, I like it.

BEBELE

The tefillin will go inside.

EIDEL

Of course, there'll be tefillin in it!

BEBELE (*kisses the little bag*)

When can I give it to him, mamma?

GITEL

At your wedding.

BEBELE

Not before?

EIDEL

It isn't proper before.

BEBELE (*shyly*)

I want him to keep his tefillin in it, and when he kisses the tefillin . . .

EIDEL (*shaking her finger reprovingly at her*)

Oh, Bebele, Bebele . . . !

BEBELE

Go on—you're mean!

GITEL

It is very proper to like your betrothed, my child, but no one need know about it. After the wedding, even the whole world may know that husband and wife live happily together. It is a blessing from God. I have to go to the shop to get some salt. Eidel, you don't leave her alone, you hear.

[*She goes out.*

BEBELE

Come over here, Eidel.

EIDEL

Are you really angry with me?

BEBELE
I was only joking.
EIDEL
It's all right to tell a mother. There's no harm.
BEBELE
Fathers don't need to know of such things.
EIDEL
If you want, we can fix it so that he will find the little bag on his study-table.
BEBELE
Really?
EIDEL
But how can we do that? You will have to wait, I guess.
BEBELE
Wait?
EIDEL
Do you really love him so much, Bebele?
BEBELE
Very much.
EIDEL
Why did you hide it from me, that you were sewing the little bag?
BEBELE
Just so. I was ashamed! Every time I made a stitch I kissed the place.
EIDEL
Give it here. We'll count how many stitches there are in the word "Sholem."
BEBELE (*throws her arms impetuously about her*)
Oh, you little fool! You little fool! You don't know how good it is to be betrothed. If I could only put my arms about *him* like this . . .
EIDEL
Let me go, you lunatic, you'll choke me yet!

BEBELE
When you'll be betrothed, you'll be like that, too! You'll crawl around under his window. If I weren't afraid to go out at night alone . . .

EIDEL
And he doesn't suspect it?

BEBELE
After the wedding, I'll tell him everything.

EIDEL
Tell him now.

BEBELE
He knows that I like him.

EIDEL
How does he know?

BEBELE
I fixed it so he would know.

EIDEL
Oh, you little thief!

BEBELE
I put a little note into his pocket when he was here for the holidays. I prepared it long before the holidays.

EIDEL
Oh, you're a clever one! Did he find it?

BEBELE
I know he did.

EIDEL
How do you know?

BEBELE
Because I feel that he loves me very much, too.

EIDEL
Do you know how much one must love a husband after the wedding?

BEBELE
Never mind, I'll know . . . But if he should become a

rabbi . . . I'd be afraid of him. I'd be afraid of him and love him so . . . Even *he* won't know how much! Of course, Eidele, I'd be ashamed to tell him how much. I would be ashamed to tell him everything I was thinking about!

EIDEL

Come here. Let me comb your hair. It is all mussed up. I'll comb both your braids into one.

[*She combs her hair.*

BEBELE

Oh, you're pulling my hair out! Oh, Eidele—mercy—have mercy!

EIDEL

Oh, I'm sorry . . . I was just thinking . . .

BEBELE

What were you thinking of?

EIDEL

How happy you must be!

BEBELE

You're not envious?

EIDEL

Yes, I really envy you!

BEBELE

I'll tell my father and he'll find you a bridegroom.

EIDEL

How you talk!

BEBELE

I'll tell him today.

EIDEL

Oh, no! I'm afraid!

BEBELE

What are you afraid of?

EIDEL

I'm afraid that he may really do it.

BEBELE
That will be fine!
EIDEL
No, no, it nearly took my breath away. No, don't say anything to him.
BEBELE
Aha, you love Sholem Maier? Is it true?
EIDEL
No, no. How you do talk!
BEBELE
Then why don't you want me to tell him? My father has made a lot of matches. . . . Little fool, then we can have both weddings in one winter!
EIDEL
No, Bebele. It isn't necessary. I think I'd begin to cry if your father came to us to talk about it.
BEBELE (*embraces her—peering at her searchingly*)
Do you like Sholem Maier? Yes? No? Say, Eidele . . . yes?
EIDEL (*softly*)
A teeny-weeny bit—because I love you so much, that's why. Because he's your bridegroom.
[*They stand in a silent embrace.*
BEBELE (*uneasily*)
Do you really love Sholem Maier?
EIDEL (*defending herself*)
No, Bebele. I swear to you, no! Don't cry. Please don't . . . I swear to you, Bebele! . . . *You* said it yourself. . . . I didn't say it! . . .
BEBELE
Oh, I feel so bad.
EIDEL
Bebele, what ails you?

BEBELE
Oh, my head! I'm dizzy!
EIDEL
I swear to you, Bebele! I'm not to blame!
BEBELE
Oh, I don't feel well! Call my mother!
[*The mother returns.*
GITEL
Woe is me! Bebele, what is it?
EIDEL
She is dizzy!
GITEL
Here, take a little water . . . swallow it down, swallow it down! . . .
EIDEL
All of a sudden, she felt sick!
GITEL
Eidel, my child, run to the House of Study and tell them to call my husband out. Let him come home right away—this minute! I can't stand it!
EIDEL
I'll run!
BEBELE
Oh, my head!
EIDEL (*kisses her*)
Please don't, Bebele . . . don't, please . . .
[*She runs out.*
GITEL
Woe is me! Woe is me! An Evil Eye has fallen upon my child! Liebe must have cast an envious eye on my child! There's no one to leave in the house here! I'll go and call her! Let her tell me what she has against me!
BEBELE
No, mama'she. It's not her fault.

GITEL
Then what is it? Woe is me! Woe is me!

BEBELE
I feel a little better now, mama'she.

GITEL
She cast an Evil Eye on you! She kissed you! I'll have her sent for!

BEBELE
Mama'she, it isn't necessary. I'm better now.

GITEL
I just left the house for a minute, for a second I left the house! Are you better, my child, my little bird?

BEBELE
It just grew dark in my eyes for a moment. But it's gone now.

GITEL
And your little heart?

BEBELE
A little heavy . . . presses here.

GITEL
They cast an Evil Eye on you, my child. Envious people! Why do they look so much on my child? Why don't they take their eyes off my child?

BEBELE
I only want a little water, mama'she.

GITEL (*giving her a drink*)
Here, my child. Rather I, than my little bird! That's it, lay your head on my heart—so. Do you feel a little better?

BEBELE
Yes, I'm better.

GITEL
The little heart—is it still heavy?

BEBELE
It is nearly all better.
[*Voices are heard outside.*
GITEL
Father and Sholem Maier are coming.
BEBELE (*jumps up*)
I'll run and hide.
GITEL
Where, my child?
BEBELE
He'll see that I've been crying.
[AARON *and* SHOLEM *hurrying in.*
AARON
What is it?
GITEL
She felt ill all of a sudden.
SHOLEM
Good evening.
GITEL
My only daughter—a bit spoiled, I guess.
BEBELE (*her head is bent, and she peeps shyly at* SHOLEM MAIER)
Where is Eidel?
AARON
She was coming on behind us.
SHOLEM
Is Bebele acting a little foolish, eh?
GITEL
I am always in fear of an Evil Eye!
SHOLEM
On your account we missed Maariv, missed the Minyan!
GITEL
I'll take the sin on my shoulders. Otherwise, when would you have gotten here?

AARON

And all because her mother holds her so gingerly. She spoiled her!

GITEL

Would that her bridegroom might hold her as dear!

AARON (*feels* BEBELE'S *head*)

As long as I got frightened! Ha! ha! what a notion to take into one's head!

GITEL (*feels* BEBELE'S *head*)

I don't notice, God forbid, anything wrong with her.

[BEBELE *winks slyly to* SHOLEM MAIER.

SHOLEM

My mother would like to have Bebele with us this coming Sabbath.

GITEL

Please God. She won't have to be coaxed!

AARON

May no harm come to us! Come, Sholem Maier. We might still have time for Maariv yet.

SHOLEM

Good night. I hope Bebele will get well very soon.

BEBELE

I am well already!

AARON

Let's hurry a bit!

[*Both go out.*

GITEL (*looks after them through the window*)

How handsome he is!

BEBELE (*hides behind her mother's back and peeps over her shoulder*

Why here's Eidel under the window! Come in, Eidel, come in! (*Runs to the door.* EIDEL *comes in. It is easily noticeable that she has been crying.*) I'm so mean . . . Eidele, are you angry with me?

GITEL

Now you see how spoiled you are? You frightened everyone for nothing—nothing at all! (EIDEL *gazes at* BEBELE *without speaking.*) Why are you so downhearted? I suppose you got frightened, too! What happened here while I was gone?

EIDEL (*tenderly curious*)

Did he talk with you, Bebele?

BEBELE

Yes, he spoke to me. He said that his mother asked me to their home over the Sabbath.

EIDEL

I was so frightened!

GITEL

Eidele, you are almost as dear to me as my own child. I daren't even give my own child a kiss. Come here to me. (*She takes the girl in her arms and presses her tightly to her heart.*) God grant that he, who is fated for you, will appear shortly! I will go and see if the stars are already out.

[*Goes out.*

BEBELE

Do you forgive me, Eidele?

EIDEL

See, I didn't even come into the house when he was here!

BEBELE

Did you want to see him?

EIDEL

I saw him through the window.

BEBELE

Isn't he handsome, yes? Very handsome?

[*She whispers something into* EIDEL'S *ear.*

EIDEL

Yes, Bebele—never again. I swear to you! Never again!

GITEL (*comes back*)
Well, how do you feel now, my child?
BEBELE
I am all well. I want to dance and jump around again.
[EIDEL *goes to her and embraces her.*
BEBELE
Will you come to see me again tomorrow?
EIDEL
I will come, Bebele. Good night to you, Gitel.
GITEL
Go in health, Eidele.
BEBELE
Good night, Eidele.
EIDEL
Sleep well, Bebele.
[*She goes out.*
GITEL
That's how you go and frighten your mother!
[*She lights the lamp.*

CURTAIN

GLOSSARY

Yeshivah— Talmudical academy
Torah— Jewish law (Pentateuch)
Gemarah— The Talmud; elaboration of the Mishnah
Shevat— January
Tefillin— Phylacteries
Maariv— Evening service
Minyan— Quorum of worshippers, consisting of ten males, the minimum required for a public service
Shin— Letter of the alphabet, pronounced "Sh"

# LONE WORLDS!

BY PEREZ HIRSCHBEIN

SHLOMAH.
SARAH.
TELTZE, SARAH'S *grand-daughter.*
EZRAEL.
CHAIM, EZRAEL'S *son.*
CHAIKEL.

*The Scene: A deep cellar dwelling; huge, gloomy and sordid, like a cave. The ceiling is low and dingy and slants downward to the tops of the windows. The walls are very dirty. The place is entirely devoid of furniture, but here and there are boards laid across wooden logs, heaped high with rags, which serve as rude beds. In one of the walls are two tiny windows. In a corner is a fire-place. It is winter, about noon.*

SHLOMAH *is lying upon one of these wretched beds, covered with a pile of rags.*

SARAH *sits on the oven, her legs crossed under her. She is dozing.*

EZRAEL *stands motionless by the wall, staring fixedly at one point.*

TELTZE *lies on one of the bunks.*

CHAIM *sits on the floor, trying to figure out something on a piece of paper.*

EZRAEL

Ha—ha! I have solved the mystery! . . . The problem is

solved! Let any one try to disprove it. (*Drawing imaginary lines with his fore-finger on the wall.*) Here you have it!—One line to the right; here she turns off to the left, and further to the right, and again to the left. Of course. Very simple! That's where she lies—right there—the River Sambatyon! Come here, Chaim'l. Tell me how many dots and how many lines do you see here on the wall?

[*He continues to stare blankly at one fixed point.*

SHLOMAH (*looks up at the ceiling and speaks to himself*)

He weaves his web about my head! . . . Chaim'l, take a stick and drive the spider away over my head!

CHAIM (*jumps up suddenly; peering into his paper gleefully*)

Oh, what a huge building! . . . Already ten years old and I haven't any shoes yet! In another ten years, when I am grown up, I'll have such a building! Now, I must lay out the rooms. . . .

[*Goes back to his work.*

SHLOMAH

When God sends a storm—a storm in the forest—trees are torn out by their roots. Even oaks are crushed! The earth itself cannot overcome the storm! Oaks and the earth together are overturned! Yet I—without hands—with but one foot—one foot is left me—and I still live! Chaim, drive the spider away! I can't see the light any more! Chaim!

EZRAEL (*promenades back and forth; eyes the inmates with mistrust; pauses a long time and watches* CHAIM'S *work;* CHAIM *does not notice him; he is deeply absorbed in his drawing*)

SARAH (*opens her eyes and tries to shake off her drowsiness; yawns several times and speaks to herself*)

Boiling water—ha—boiling water! A bit of gravy and a

few crumbs to refresh me! . . . No teeth in my mouth! What can one do without teeth, what? (*She is lost in thought.*) When I bore Basiah, I lost my first tooth out of my head. When Chavah was born, another fell out, and when I bore Nachman, I lost three at one time. . . . After that they fell one after another to the last one. . . . The whole mouth remained hollow, empty! . . . (*Taps her bare gums with her thin fingers.*) Empty! Empty! Everything passes away . . . passes away!

[*Shakes her head wearily and presently dozes off again.*

EZRAEL (*still standing by the wall, and describing imaginary lines on it with his finger*)

You think the dots and the lines and the spots on the walls and the ceiling are just chance?—A mistake! A great mistake! Each one has its definite meaning, each has a purpose! On the other hand, let any one convince me to the contrary. . . . My eyes are dim. I can't make out what there is up there, over me. (*Tries to decipher the smudges on the ceiling.*) There—up there—is altogether another world! There are many worlds, it seems, and each different from the other. Look at the dots and the lines. Here you have it—big ones and little ones, straight ones and crooked ones. The colors different, too. (*Turning to the inmates.*) What do you say to this long line here, which stretches off to the left?

[*He does not wait for a reply, and is again lost in thought.*

TELTZE (*crawls off her bunk*)

Nachman was a fool! Basiah was a fool! A man alone, friendless, a stranger! What can a man alone do? I haven't the energy to get off the bed! (*She turns to the old woman.*) Babeh! Tell me, how did my mother look before she died? All are dead! Why did they leave me, tell me? (*She crawls back again on her bunk.*) I'll forget

how to speak soon! I will forget my name even! Oh, I want to eat . . . eat . . . Where's Chaikel? Why doesn't he come?

CHAIM (*delightedly*)

Ten rooms on each floor? And in all there'll be—there'll be—(*Appealing to* EZRAEL.) Ten times ten are how much, papa?

EZRAEL (*looks at him in mild astonishment*)

On the contrary—let some one convince me the other way . . .

CHAIM (*appealing to* TELTZE)

Auntie, tell me, how much are ten times ten, ha?

[*He gets no reply. He counts on his fingers.*

TELTZE

I wonder why they do not play up there today? (*Looking toward the ceiling and thinking.*) Why do they sit up there, and I, down here? Why? Who put me down here? Why can't I get out of here? . . . I am in all—only forty years old . . . thirty . . . forty years old. (*Touches her face.*) Wrinkles! Wrinkles! (*Discovers a piece of looking-glass under her pillow. She peers at herself in the glass.*) Every day a tiny little wrinkle! Every day comes another little wrinkle! The whole forehead covered with them. My cheeks . . . (*Springs down feverishly from her bunk and appeals to the old woman.*) Babeh, tell me, why have they locked me up in here? . . . If only they'd commence to play the music up there . . . ha! I'd love to hear again that lively, thin, little tune. What do they call it? If I saw any one from upstairs I'd ask them what they call it. When I get married . . . will they play music then?

[*Sits down again on her bed in deep thought.*

CHAIM (*jumps up happily*)

Ten times ten are one hundred, a whole hundred! One

hundred rooms there'll be in my house! Now, for the basement and the barn!

[*Gets down again to his drawing.*

SHLOMAH (*breaks out in bitter laughter*)

Ha-ha-ha, doctors! Doctors! Doctors without heads, without brains! Where is their sense, their understanding, their judgment? Both hands and a foot they cut me off—I'd forgive them everything! But my head—my heart, why did they leave me them? What can a man do with one foot? Father in heaven! Take my heart, take, take! (*Sticks his foot out from beneath the pile of rags and considers it thoughtfully.*) That's all I have left! . . . In what dung-heap is your other rotting? My hands—where are they rotting? If only they had left me one of my hands—the left hand even! They left me my mouth—to eat and to curse! . . . I'm hungry—I'll curse! . . . Whom shall I curse? . . . Some one drive the spider away! The spider over my head!

TELTZE (*crawls off the bed again and walks about*)

A weariness has eaten into my bones! (*Looks thoughtfully at her hands.*) Lead, not bones, is in there!

EZRAEL (*pointing to the wall*)

Let any one convince me to the contrary! Lines and dots. The lines indicate the seas, and the dots—are the islands—the lands. Here you have the whole map! Now for the Sambatyon, and afterwards to Mount Ararat, and direct to Persia. . . .

[TELTZE *looks closely at* EZRAEL *and shakes her head.*

SHLOMAH

If only the building would fall in once and for all, and grind us to a powder! If a thunderbolt from heaven would only come down and crush in the walls and us with it! But it is four months to summer yet and I will lie here! Tell me what month is this? Why is every one so still

when I call? My gall will burst! . . . Why doesn't some one answer! Chaikel! Why doesn't Chaikel come? The spider—drive it away from my head!

TELTZE (*crawls back onto her bunk*)

Weary! Weary! Weary!

SARAH (*wakes up, rubs her eyes and looks about her*)

Nachman would always console me—always comfort me! (*Yawning.*) "Don't worry, mamma, when I grow up, please God" . . . A precious child was Basiah, a dear child, born to be loved. Nachman was a brighter child. Might have been a rabbi! Everybody said so! C-o-o-l-d —Is it night already? It is dark in my eyes! Chaikel, ha, Chaikel! Not here? (*Shakes her head dolefully.*) Everything passes away! They're rotting in the ground—all in the ground—all is over—all is over!

[*She dozes off again.*

CHAIM

If I could only get up there, on the top story, to see how the rooms are there—the tables—the benches— Up there, where the music is, must be a big room, I suppose. That's where the little girl sits. She plays. Her mamma sits by her and strokes her head! (*To* EZRAEL.) Listen, papa! (EZRAEL *does not heed him.* CHAIM *pulls at his sleeve.*) Only listen, papa! Tell me—look into my face— You're my father, aren't you? Then, why don't you want to look at me? (EZRAEL *does not answer him—just glances at him with dull, vacant eyes.*) Every day I ask you to tell me where my mother is. Tell me—where is she? I want to go to her! I don't need you! I want to find her! I'll go from city to city and into all the houses! Tell me, papa, what did they call her? How did she look? Tell me, papa!

TELTZE (*laughs to herself, pleased*)

It can still be! I'm not too old—I will yet! Only thirty years old—forty— (*Presses her breasts with both hands.*)

I want to hold a little one here—a warm, pink, little thing— (*Whispering to herself.*) I'd hold it close—so close—right here I'd hold it—tight—tight— (CHAIM *gazes at her from where he sits on the floor.*) At night—here on my bed—I'd lie with it—we'd cover ourselves with the rags—I would hug him to my breast! And he—with his little hands fumbles, fumbles around in the dark, digs with his little hands—searches for my breast—in the dark! I can't see anything, but I feel him searching—searching—

SARAH

Chaim'l, dear child! Come here, precious child, come to me!

[CHAIM'L *crawls upon the oven near the old woman; she forgets that she has called him, and pays no further attention to him.*

SHLOMAH

I'll tear my body with my teeth!—Oaks in the forest are torn up by the storm—oaks and the earth together—and are turned over in the air! Cities are crumpled up by a thunderbolt! My foot! Cut off my other foot! Cut off my head! Cut me in strips! Why do you all keep quiet! Murderers! Butchers! May a thunderbolt from God shatter you into bits! Kill me or listen to my crying! Are you all gone deaf? All deaf! Sarah! Teltze! Ezrael! But he's crazy anyway . . . Chaim!

SARAH (*drowsily*)

When they laid Nachman in his grave his face shone as if he were alive. Another would have been wasted by the sickness. When I saw them put the shards on his shining eyes the light went out of my eyes. I didn't cry, but it grew dark in my eyes. Maybe, that is why it grew dark in my eyes. The little cradle must still be hanging up in the loft. Two belly-bands were lying up there, too—one a red

one and one a white. He still wore them. . . . Nachman spoke right up to the last minute. Knew he was dying. His mind was clear to the last. . . . Everything passes away.

[*Her head droops. She dozes off again.*

EZRAEL

The path—from one star to the other—I cannot find it. From the sun to the moon there is no path, either. From the earth to the heavens there is no course. That is proof that each is a world by itself. About that there is no doubt. Let some one show me to the contrary. (*Looking up at the ceiling.*) Up there is still another world—entirely another world. There must be animals up there, too. Let any one try to convince me otherwise.

TELTZE (*peering into the piece of looking-glass*)

I'm not too old yet. It can still be. Why not? First of all I'll have to escape from the cellar and not come back. . . . But how does one begin to do that? I am quite friendless. I don't know any one. I have forgotten how to speak to a human being. If I should meet any one on the street what would I say to him? . . . What would he say to me? . . . No one. No one. I know no one. I have forgotten how to speak. (*Turning to* CHAIM.) Cham'l, dear Chaim'l, what do you want with your crazy father? Better come to me, come—come. We will both talk together. You won't find your mother even if you went to look for her. Dogs have devoured her! A fierce frost in the street—she froze to death! I am already thirty—forty years old. You can call me "mamma," and I you, "dear child, beloved child," and when Chaikel comes in with the basket I will pick out the raisin bread for you. (*Waiting eagerly for his reply.* CHAIM *hides his head between his knees.*) Wolves have eaten your mother! You never had a

mother at all! Your crazy father doesn't know where she is, either. . . .

[*From above are heard the opening tones of a melody played on a piano.*

CHAIM (*springing down joyously*)

The music is beginning! I hear it!

TELTZE

The lively, thin, little tune! *She* is playing—the pretty pale girl, who passes by the cellar each day. It is a little girl, who plays up there—a very little girl—maybe only ten years old. . . . I feel as if very thin little fingers were playing up there. I must get nearer to the ceiling. (*She stands up on her bunk and leans her head up against the low ceiling.*) It is the thin, little tune . . . trr . . . trrr . . . trrr. . . .

SHLOMAH

Music! Music! For that they have ears! . . . Murderers! A man is dying before their very eyes . . . dying . . . !

CHAIM

When I close my eyes I can see the room where the music is. A splendid, large, high room, with big tables and big red chairs! And some one is playing—a little girl is playing!

[*Listens eagerly.*

TELTZE

A pale little girl is playing, with thin, thin little fingers. In the fingers there are no little bones!

[*She listens intently.*

EZRAEL

Here you have the whole map complete—all the seas, all the rivers! (*Raises his head to the ceiling, his mouth gaping wide.*) Ha, music! That is already beyond me! Up

there among the unknown worlds! That is beyond my control! . . .

[*Remains standing with his mouth wide open—listening.*

SHLOMAH (*blowing at the ceiling*)

Down from there—down! What shall I do? There is nothing left for me to do but to lie on my belly with my face down, so I can't see him, or my gall will burst in me! (*He turns over.*) He'll soon have the web spun entirely around my head—around—around! Oh, if a thunderbolt would fall! Turn over the building—foundation and all—the building with the walls, so that not a stone will remain standing upright—not a brick! . . .

CHAIKEL (*comes in. He carries on his arm a basket filled with pieces of bread of all kinds. He puts the basket down beside him on the floor; springs upon one of the beds and quickly covers his feet with the tails of his coat. The rest do not seem to notice him*)

Ha—ha—ha—how cold! Want to warm my feet. Forgot to tie the rags around them! Got a basket full of goodies today. I hear music every day! Every day I hear music! A lot of music!

SHLOMAH (*seeing* CHAIKEL)

Ha, Chaikel! You've come? Come here to me, my redeemer! I thought I should die before you got here! No one here to listen to me but you!—No one who can understand my agony!—Come to me, Chaikel!

CHAIKEL

Soon—soon. I will only warm my feet a little!

SHLOMAH

Only one foot I have—and it is too much! I begged for death! I begged for a thunderbolt! Come to me, Chaikel!

CHAIKEL

In a little while—just want to warm my feet. There's a fearful frost outside today! Snow up to the knees in the

streets! My feet are so cold! I'll just warm them through a little. I hear music in the streets all the time and at weddings. At weddings musicians play and the people dance.

[TELTZE *looks at him with deep agony in her face.*

SHLOMAH

Chaikel! Chaikel!

CHAIKEL (*jumps upon* SHLOMAH'S *bunk*)

Here I am, near you. Want some raisin bread?

SHLOMAH

You see that spider there? He's spinning a web around my head. Take a stick and drive him away. Tear it down!

CHAIKEL (*looking at the spider-web*)

What a pretty web! Oh—how pretty!

SHLOMAH (*angrily*)

Tear it! Tear it down!

CHAIKEL

I can't without a stick. (*Stands upon the bunk and tears down the web with his hand.*) A pity, a pity! It was so pretty!

SHLOMAH

And the spider—did you catch him?

CHAIKEL

He ran away.

SHLOMAH

Catch him. Catch him! Kill him! When you go away, he'll begin all over again! Catch him!

CHAIKEL

He's hiding in a corner somewhere.

SHLOMAH

Chase him with a stick and kill him! Go, chase him!

SARAH (*waking up*)

Chavah didn't want to go begging! I didn't force her!

And Nachman would say that I would yet become a real person some day!

CHAIKEL

Granny, see! All the good things I brought—white bread, fresh, too!

[*The music above ceases.*

TELTZE (*regretfully*)

The music is over! She played so little today! Some one must have scolded her, so she stopped! Ha, Chaikel, you've come? Did you bring any bread with raisins?

[*She hunts around in the basket.*

CHAIM (*goes to the basket*)

Too bad, she played so little today!—The bread with the raisins is mine!

[*Hunts around in the basket.*

SHLOMAH

Why when I called, did no one hear me?

SARAH

I hear, for instance, when Chaikel is in the house. Some one hand me a piece of soft, white bread. (TELTZE *picks out several pieces of bread for herself and goes back to her bed and eats it.* CHAIM *sits down on the floor next to the basket.*) Chaikel! I hear that you are in the house. Why don't you answer me?

CHAIKEL (*springs down from* SHLOMAH'S *bunk and carries the whole basket to her*)

I came, of course, I came. Here, I have brought you the whole basket. Pick out what you want!

SARAH

I can feel the soft, fresh bread with my fingers, but is it white?

SHLOMAH

Why didn't you cover me, Chaikel? You didn't kill the spider and he's already spinning another web, Chaikel!

CHAIKEL (*hands* SARAH *some bread. To* SHLOMAH)

I'm coming! I'm coming! (*To* SARAH.) This is good for you. It's soft. You can eat it without teeth.

EZRAEL (*takes hold of* CHAIKEL *and proceeds to promenade with him in friendly fashion*)

Between the two mountains lies a valley. And between the two rivers lies dry land. One river flows into the other, and both—into the sea. Just let some one convince me to the contrary. You don't understand it? (*Leads him to the wall.*) Stand here and watch it. I still have to find the strip between the Sambatyon and the country of Persia. You stand and watch. Don't stir! Don't stir from the spot! I'll go and eat.

[*Takes a few pieces of bread from the basket at random, chews, walking up and down deeply absorbed.*

SHLOMAH

Me—you forget me, Chaikel! I want to refresh my heart so that I can have the strength to curse! Chaikel!

CHAIKEL

Yes, yes!

[*Wants to go to him.*

EZRAEL (*pointing to the wall*)

Stand right where you are!

CHAIM

Go bring better bread. Go ask them to give you bread with raisins, go!

[CHAIKEL *stands confused. He does not know which request to satisfy first.*

TELTZE (*sweetly*)

Tell me, Chaikel! How do the people look in the street? I have already forgotten how they look. Tell me! Do you see little children in the street, Chaikel?

CHAIM

Tell me, Chaikel. Maybe you've seen my mother in the

street? You go around all day long. Tell me—I must have had a mother!—

SHLOMAH

Why am I so cursed? Why didn't they leave me my left hand at least! One at a time I'd crush in your heads!—Chaikel!

CHAIKEL (*catches up the basket and puts it hastily at* SHLOMAH'S *feet*)

Here, you have the basket!

[EZRAEL *marches him back to the wall.*

EZRAEL

Stand right there and watch!

SHLOMAH

You fool! What good does the basket do me, when I have no hands? Chaikel! Are you, too, teasing me!

TELTZE (*crawls down from her bunk. Takes* CHAIKEL *by the hand*)

Come to me! Don't mind them. Sit here and listen to what I am going to say to you.

EZRAEL

Where there was a mountain and where a valley, you will never find . . .

[*Stands again at the wall and looks fixedly at one point.*

SHLOMAH

Only a thunderbolt from heaven can lay you all out! I'll wait till summer and pray God to hurl down a thunderbolt!

SARAH

Chaikel! Chaikel!

TELTZE (*holding him fast*)

Don't listen to them. Don't listen to them. Let her sit there, the old woman. Tell me a story. Tell me what you see in

the streets. Whom do you see there, ha? You, Chaikel, are not friendless. You see everybody. Tell me, what did you see in the street today?

CHAIM (*sitting down again on the floor to figure*)

Go, Chaikel, bring bread with a lot of raisins in it. Go. hunt up my mother for me, too.

SHLOMAH

Why did they stick the basket under my nose—that the smell of the fresh bread should burn my heart out? Take it away! You—take it away! (*Kicks the basket away with his foot. The bread is scattered to all sides.*) Only one foot is left me, and with it I'll shatter everything around me!

CHAIKEL

A pity the bread, a pity the bread!

TELTZE

From morning till night you are on the streets—on the other side of the cellar. Listen to what I tell you. You'll go out at night on the street. You'll meet a little child, or, maybe, women with children. Catch one. Put it into your basket and run back—to me!

[CHAIKEL *looks at her in amazement.*

SARAH

Ten years since I went to Nachman's grave. Ten years since I haven't been to Chava's . . . Basiah's, I don't remember at all—Chaikel, Chaikel!

CHAIKEL (*getting up*)

I'll go and pick up the bread.

TELTZE (*holding him back*)

Never mind. You can get other bread. I only want to keep it for one night near me. Its little hands will dig—dig! I'll hide it here under the rags.

[*Whispering into his ear.*

SHLOMAH

If they were my children, I'd bite into their bodies one at a time! One at a time I'd gnaw their bodies with my teeth! With my foot, kick out their hearts! But all they left me to bite is my one foot! I'll bite my own body for torture! On whom shall I pour out my fury?—On myself—my own body!

SARAH

When the snow melts I'll ask Chaikel to lead me out in the sun. I'll go to the cemetery. Nachman's grave I'll still find, I think. I remember the mark. I'll feel for it with my hands—for the stick which I stuck into the grave. The little cradle must still be on Chava's grave. Chaikel, Chaikel.

[TELTZE *holds on to him and continues to whisper into his ear.*

EZRAEL (*carried away with joy; crushes his hat down on his head*)

Found—the right course! Everything found—solved! (*Pulls out one of the bunks into the middle of the room, jumps upon it and taps the ceiling with his finger, happily.*)

Here I have the entire firmament—in the palm of my hand—in my very hand! Dots and lines, lines and dots! There's nothing new in the whole world! Let any one convince me to the contrary. Now, I understand the great secret—why the rain persists in falling from above instead of the other way. Nothing new in the whole world! Nothing new in the whole world! Always the same mountains, always the same seas, always the same rivers! That is the secret of the rain! Nothing new! All in the palm of my hand!

[*Traces with his finger over the ceiling, speaking constantly to himself.*

TELTZE (*stands up, takes* CHAIKEL *by the hand and leads him toward the door*)

Go, now, and remember what I told you—just as I told you!

CHAIKEL (*stubbornly*)

Don't! I'll take the basket and bring some bread, more wood.

[*Snatches up his basket.*

SHLOMAH

I'll die of hunger! Chaikel! Where are you going!

TELTZE (*pushes him into the street*)

Go! Go quicker! You'll come back by night. (*She goes back to her bunk—speaking passionately.*) Just for one night! Just for one night! Under the blankets—He will seek with his little hands—with his little hands he will dig—dig into my body—my breast!

[*She becomes dreamily absorbed.*

CHAIM (*jumps up suddenly, runs to the door and pounds upon it with his fist*)

Chaikel! My mother—my mother! Chaikel, remember—my mother!

SHLOMAH (*screams*)

Chaikel, where to? May a thunderbolt overtake you on the way! Come back! Only one piece of bread put into my mouth! One bite of bread! I'll bite myself! I'll gnaw my own bones! I'll tear out my heart and drink the blood! Are you all deaf? (*Screaming terrifically.*) Are you all deaf!—You hear!—Hear!—Hear! One bite of bread put into my mouth! One b-i-t-e of bread! . . . The spider—drive it down!

SARAH

One by one, one by one—they all died—my children! One by one, one by one, the grandchildren died!—One by one, one by one, the teeth fell out!—Little by little, little

by little, it has grown dark in my eyes!—Little by little, little by little, everything passes away!—Everything passes away!

[*She shakes her head sadly and slowly until it droops and she dozes off again.*

CURTAIN

### Glossary

Sambatyan—Legendary river, fabled to be turbulent for six days of the week and to rest on the seventh, the Sabbath.

Chaim'l—Affectionate diminutive for Chaim.

Babeh—Granny.

# AFTER THE FUNERAL

BY ISAAC LOEB PERETZ

*(The scene should be enacted with incidental musical accompaniment.)*

THE WIDOW.
HER TWO AUNTS.
AN ANGEL-MESSENGER FROM HEAVEN.

*Scene: To the left and right, doors. In the background two windows covered with curtains. On the wall hangs a mirror with its face turned to the wall, indicating a house of mourning. On one of the window-sills are a piece of linen and a sole candle. From the center of the ceiling is suspended a chandelier with various colored candles in the holders. Between the two windows is a small kitchen stool, upon which are a bit of bread, the shells of hard-boiled eggs, and a partly consumed egg—the leavings of the mourners' supper. The upholstered furniture is disarranged. It is just before nightfall. During the action of the play the moon shines in through the window, illuminating the room. The music prior to rise of curtain should denote a deep and agitated melancholy.*

*The* WIDOW *sits motionless on the bench. Her face is set stonily and her eyes stare unseeingly. The* AUNTS *stand near the table in the foreground.*

FIRST AUNT
She hasn't shed a tear yet.

SECOND AUNT
She just sits and looks—what does she see?
[*Pause.*
FIRST AUNT
From her face, she would seem to be fading away.
THE WIDOW (*dreamily*)
Auntie, what were you doing in the cemetery?
FIRST AUNT
Nothing—
THE WIDOW
Did you pick a few little flowers?
FIRST AUNT (*to the other*)
That is what she did—at the rending of garments. She bent down and—
THE WIDOW (*to the* SECOND AUNT)
And you—auntie?
[*Forgets that she has asked a question and lapses again into herself.*
FIRST AUNT (*after a pause*)
Turned to stone again.
SECOND AUNT
If only she had a father.
FIRST AUNT
A mother rather . . . a mother, somehow, always knows what to do. . . .
SECOND AUNT
Better still . . . a baby.
FIRST AUNT
It would have cried, at least.
SECOND AUNT
If it were a tiny one, she would have suckled it.
FIRST AUNT
On the way back, going through the gate-way, she asked: "Where is my husband?"

SECOND AUNT

The same when she came back to the house. . . . "Isn't he home yet?" she asked.

[*Pause.*

FIRST AUNT

I must go home and give the children something to eat.

SECOND AUNT

My husband just returned from the road. He will curse.

FIRST AUNT

She ought to be put to bed.

THE WIDOW

When I was a girl I used to know how to dance. . . . (*The* AUNTS *become uneasy and move toward her. The* WIDOW *to herself.*) And whistle, too . . . no one suspected it . . . not even he.

FIRST AUNT (*frightened*)

God be with you!

SECOND AUNT

God be with you!

THE WIDOW (*after a pause, mildly surprised*)

God?—with me?

FIRST AUNT

Come, come, go to sleep.

SECOND AUNT

Yes, go to sleep.

FIRST AUNT

Come, I will read your evening prayers with you.

SECOND AUNT

". . . who causest sleep to fall upon mine eyes, and slumber upon mine eyelids. . . ."

FIRST AUNT

I will undress you.

[SECOND AUNT *proceeds to do so.*

THE WIDOW

No . . . no . . . I must sit up with him. I must sit up with him. (*Goes out toward right.*) I don't want a stranger near him. I, alone—I, alone . . . He will take anything from my hand . . . I sing him little songs.

[*Goes out. The* AUNTS *follow her out and return shortly, pausing on the threshold for a moment.*

FIRST AUNT

How quickly she fell asleep!

SECOND AUNT

Yes, with her eyes open.

FIRST AUNT

But she is snoring.

SECOND AUNT

It seems to me, somehow, too soon. . . . I think she may be pretending.

FIRST AUNT

What an idea!

SECOND AUNT (*unconvinced*)

I don't know . . . (*Pause.*) Perhaps she has forgotten for a while!

[*Sighs. They come further into the room.*

FIRST AUNT

She may wake up and come in here and see! (*Pointing to the memorial light.*) Shall I put it out?

SECOND AUNT

It shouldn't be done. . . . Shall I hide it?

[*She moves the candle behind the curtain, where it can scarcely be seen.*

FIRST AUNT

And the piece of linen.

[*Pushes it also behind the curtain.*

SECOND AUNT

The looking-glass?

FIRST AUNT

It is dark; perhaps she won't notice it. . . . One mustn't turn it back. . . . Come. . . . And the stool, too.

[*Pushes it to the window and covers it with an edge of the curtain.*

SECOND AUNT

And the foot-stool. (*Pushes it to the other window and hides it with the edge of the curtain. Pause.*) She is all alone in the house.

FIRST AUNT

They were two lonely souls. (*Reassuringly.*) We will be back directly. (*The* AUNTS *go to the door at left and stop for a moment. The* WIDOW *appears on the threshold, sees the* AUNTS, *smiles slyly, and quickly withdraws.*) We will lock her in from the outside.

SECOND AUNT

From the other side.

[*They go out and lock the door from the other side.*

THE WIDOW (*appears again on the threshold. There is the same sly little smile on her lips. She looks stealthily around.*)

I fooled them. (*She starts to cross the room and steps suddenly on an egg-shell. It crackles loudly under her foot in the silence of the room. She becomes very frightened, stands very still, looks about her uneasily and her gaze becomes riveted to the moon, which is now shining brightly into the room.*) The moon is shining. The street is asleep. (*Endearingly.*) Come, my bridegroom, let us go for a walk. . . . (*Makes as if to take some one's arm and promenades about the room.*) But you musn't kiss me! . . . You hear? . . . There's time enough for that!

(*Bending her head.*) But my hair you may kiss. It smells of perfume? . . . I didn't put anything on it. . . . That is my soul that is perfumed! . . . That is what you say? Yes? Why are you so silent today? Your lips move, but I hear no sound. (*Stops walking.*) Why do you look away from me? . . . (*Uneasy.*) I do not feel your hand . . . nor you, either, somehow! . . . (*Thoroughly frightened.*) Where are you?—Ah! (*Smiling, reassured.*) It is the Sabbath Eve! He must have gone to the synagogue to pray. . . . (*Looking down at her dress.*) And I am not yet dressed! (*She starts to go toward the chair—stops short and smiles—forgets altogether what it is she wanted to do.*) He will soon be here and say: (*Imitating him.*) "Good Shabbos" . . . in a sing-song, "Good Shabbos" . . . (*She holds her lips up to be kissed.*) Then he'll strut to and fro across the room, and, in a deep voice: "Peace be with thee." (*Sings—stops short right in the middle of a little melody.*)—What, the Sabbath lights not blessed yet? (*She takes candles and candle-sticks out of the closet, lights the candles and blesses them very slowly, covering her eyes with both hands. In the midst of the blessing she starts to laugh.*) I see you! I see you through my fingers— Back already? . . . Don't come near, don't come near me! . . . Sing, "Peace be with thee," while I change my dress in honor of the Sabbath. . . . Don't you look—you glutton, don't you look, now! . . . Sing! (*Sings "Sholem Aleichem," goes to the closet, opens the door nearest the audience. She is partly hidden by the open door. Speaking slowly and haltingly as she dresses.*) Why don't you sing? Don't you hear how I sing? (*She comes out of the closet dressed in white.*) Why don't you sing? Are you angry? Why? (*She tries to recall something, raising her eyebrows in the effort. As she does so, she notices the chandelier with the colored*

*lights and is suddenly reminded.*) Ah! a holiday and the candles are not lit in the chandelier! You want more light! I know you—you would bathe in light! A holiday . . . good, good. Lucky it's a holiday and not the Sabbath. . . . Wait, I'll light the chandelier—with two candles at a time. (*Takes the two candles from the table.*) Push a chair under me. You don't want to?—Why? Are you still angry? Mean thing! (*Tearfully.*) Mean thing . . . mean . . . never mind! I'll do it myself. (*Shoving a chair along with her foot; she jumps upon it and begins to light the chandelier.*) Wait, you wait . . . by and by, after supper . . . *I'll* get angry . . . I (*Gets down from the chair tenderly and ruefully.*) No, no . . . you are not very strong, my poor dear! . . . (*Puts the candles back in their holders on the table.*) Well, then, come and have supper. . . . I will sit down . . . so . . . I'll be there in a little while. (*She goes out and comes right back with an empty plate, forks and knives, sets the table, as if there were some one sitting opposite her.*) Eat, my dearest, eat in health . . . fish cooked with raisins, just the way you love it. . . . You don't want to eat? Your eyes are closing? . . . Yes . . . I know you, just wait, I'll wake you up! (*Goes quickly off right, comes directly back barefoot, shrouded in a white sheet and tries to frighten him.*) Booh—booh—booh!—Where are you? Have you hidden somewhere? What notions he gets into his head! I'll find you, I'll find you! (*Looks for him under chairs, the table, in the closet; finally she grows weary.*) That's enough. . . . I'm tired . . . so many nights I didn't sleep! Come out . . . Come out . . . do! Here! (*Lifts her mouth for his kisses.*) Here! (*Lifts her hair with her hands.*) I will cover you with my hair . . . come . . . come now . . . Ah! from under the stove he came! . . . Ha-ha-ha! (*In the midst of her laughter, she stops short—*

*nonplussed.*) Where are you going, where are you going? Somehow, you grow thinner and thinner. (*Following.*) To the window? . . . To the window? You want to go through the window? I don't want to! I'm afraid! (*Stretches out her hand as if to get hold of him, stumbles over the stool, feels for it and in so doing moves the curtain away—when she suddenly sees the remains of the meal and the light—she screams.*) Ah! (*Springs back to the door at left, falls and seems to forget again; she stands up, leans against the stool. The music plays quietly and mournfully.*) The garden is falling asleep . . . asleep . . . sh! . . . sh! . . . (*The music, which should be a theme imitative of a bird's song, grows fainter and fainter and finally dies away.*) The little birds, singing, fall asleep . . . fall asleep . . . sh!—sh! (*Faint and tender music is heard again.*) The little creek between the trees is falling asleep. . . . It glistens and trembles so still, so still. . . . Ah, the white swan skims the glistening water so smooth and still . . . so still . . .

[*A white* Angel *with large wings enters very quietly and slowly from door at left.*

Sh! . . . Sh! . . .

[*The* Angel *approaches her, looks down at her for a while, and slowly and mournfully covers her face with his wing. The music breaks off suddenly, like the snapping of a violin string.*

CURTAIN

# BROTHERS

## *A COMEDY*

BY ABRAHAM RAISEN

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GLICKMAN
BAS
HURWITZ
BERMAN
} *New Arrivals*

BERTHA, *a comrade.*

FIRST PEDDLER, SECOND PEDDLER, THIRD PEDDLER, FOURTH PEDDLER.

*Scene: A room off a long corridor on the fourth floor. Near the east wall stands a small table without leaves. A tea-receptacle lies neglected under the table; near the table is a chair with a broken arm; the arm lies orphaned on the floor near it. A broken iron bedstead stands near the north wall; it is not made up; the blanket drags partly on the floor, exposing a coarse, straw mattress, out of which protrudes a handful of straw. Over the bed, on the wall, hang a shabby hat and an old, worn, short coat. Upon the rise of the curtain and for a short while thereafter the scene remains unoccupied. Behind the scene the voices of* GLICKMAN *and* BAS *are heard. The door opens, and they fairly fall into the room.*

GLICKMAN (*twenty-seven years old; tall and thin; shabbily dressed in an old outfit and soiled collar*)
There you have it! He's out, too. When it doesn't go, it doesn't go, that's all!

BAS (*of medium build; dressed in a blue shirt; has long, black hair and wears glasses out of which look two angry, black eyes*)

So, that's your magnate! (*Looks at the bed.*) A fine magnate!

GLICKMAN

I didn't represent him as a capitalist. I only said that at times he gets a few roubles from home. . . . Maybe he got some today.

BAS

And if he did get it, he's probably spent it long ago.

GLICKMAN

You think every one is made in your image! But what's the use—he's not here! Come!

BAS

No. I can't go any more! I haven't any strength left! I'm going to lie down on that bed and lie there till my soul goes out!

[*He stretches himself on the bed.*

GLICKMAN

You're a fool. . . . One mustn't give up . . . I tell you we're bound to get money today. I feel in me a certain power—strength!

BAS

I don't need anything! . . . I'll just lie here and . . . If only we had a cigarette! You have none, perhaps a part of one?

GLICKMAN

I must have about me somewhere one partly smoked. But I want a smoke badly, too. . . . We'll divide it. Let's see, have you a match?

[*Takes a cigarette from his pocket.*

BAS

A match I think I have. (*Lying down, he takes out of his*

*pocket a little match-box and opens it.*) Only one! Careful now!

GLICKMAN (*examining it thoughtfully*)

The match is a good one, apparently. (*He strikes it carefully, holding the butt of the cigarette in his mouth; watching the match to see whether it will burn.*) Now—now—no! Will it go out?—No!

BAS

Hurry!

GLICKMAN (*carries the bit of fire to his mouth quickly. presently a tail of smoke issues*)

Done!

BAS

Well, thank God, it smokes! You smoke and leave a few whiffs for me.

GLICKMAN

I'll leave some, I'll leave some.

[*Takes several strong draws and hands the rest to* BAS; BAS *gazes at it grudgingly—miserly; makes a wry face and puts it into his mouth.*

BAS

If I had something just now that would destroy the whole town—I'd do it, willy nilly!

GLICKMAN

And if I had something to sell at this moment to get a good dinner, I'll sell it! (*Thinking.*) What, for instance, could I sell? (*Looks through his pockets and pulls out an old purse.*) What do you think, Bas; could one get anything for it?

BAS (*looks at it from where he lies*)

You can throw it out!

GLICKMAN

It once cost a half rouble.

BAS

Once—once *you* were worth more, too!

GLICKMAN

Yes, once. . . . Never mind! I'm not done yet. . . . Somehow, I feel that life is still before me . . . that all this is just a—prelude. . . . What matters it if the prelude is a bit trifling!

BAS

Your whole life will be a sort of prelude. . . . You will never really grasp the root of it—and your life will be one search for pupils—and a dinner!

GLICKMAN

As to that, we'll see! (*From the court is heard the cry of a* PEDDLER: *"Peddler! Peddler!"*) If only there were something to sell!

[*The cry is heard again.*

BAS

What have you to sell—your soul? Who'd buy it? It's already soiled!

GLICKMAN (*glancing at the wall and seeing the coat*)

Why should I sell my soul, when there hangs right here a fairly good little coat? (*Feels of the coat.*) Yes, not at all a bad little coat!

BAS (*shocked*)

Is it yours then?

GLICKMAN

You're a fool! Mine? The peddler's in the yard, and we're in here—so it's ours!

BAS

True, I am a bit of an anarchist—that you know. . . . But there are nicer ways. . . .

[*The* PEDDLER *continues his crying: "Peddler, peddler!"* GLICKMAN *runs out into the court.* BAS *remains alone; he stands up. After a bit* GLICKMAN *comes in with the*

PEDDLER—*a Jew about fifty years old; he wears a long, well-worn coat and high boots.*

PEDDLER

Well, let's have a look at your wares. What have you?

GLICKMAN (*takes the coat off the wall*)

Here, this coat. I would like to sell it.

PEDDLER (*takes the coat in his hand and turns it on all sides*)

An old, little coat. It's got a few holes already. . . .

GLICKMAN

Where?

PEDDLER

Where, you ask? Don't you see? Have you something else, too? Old shoes, pants?

GLICKMAN

Just what you see. More I haven't. Well, what do you give?

BAS (*groans*)

What a man can come to!

PEDDLER (*examining the lining*)

The lining is already rotten. . . . What can one give for such a coat? I mean . . . what can one offer? . . . How much do you want?

GLICKMAN

You buy constantly. You must know better.

PEDDLER

I think . . . What do you mean, I know better? . . . It's your goods, so you must set your price.

GLICKMAN

Yes, that's true. My goods—

BAS (*anxiously*)

Well, make it quicker!

GLICKMAN (*exclaims*)

Two roubles!

PEDDLER (*looks at him angrily; takes his sack under his arm and wants to go*)

GLICKMAN (*frightened*)

Well, how much will you give? You can at least say.

PEDDLER (*softens and comes back*)

I'll sell you such coats myself for fifteen kopecs apiece—at least a hundred of them!

GLICKMAN (*angrily*)

I don't deal in coats. Say what you'll give.

[PEDDLER *takes the coat again and examines it.*

BAS

Oh, I don't feel right about it!

PEDDLER

A half rouble.

GLICKMAN (*hurriedly*)

Take it. It's really given away, but let a Jew make a living!

BAS (*quietly*)

You're a rare one!

GLICKMAN (*aside*)

Keep still!

PEDDLER (*takes the coat in his hand again, and turns it over again and again on all sides*)

GLICKMAN (*impatiently*)

Well, mister, make it quicker!

BAS

The man is backing out—

PEDDLER

Backing out is not business. I'm not backing out, but I won't get rich from it. (*Takes out of his pocket a small purse; scratches about in it with his fingers, and finally takes out a silver rouble.*) Have you change—a half rouble?

GLICKMAN
No!

BAS
If we only had a half rouble!

GLICKMAN (*steps on* BAS's *foot*)
Shut up!

PEDDLER
What's to be done? I'll have to go and have it changed.

GLICKMAN (*very anxiously*)
Haven't you smaller money?

PEDDLER
No. I have only a few roubles. . . .

GLICKMAN
Well, let's go down in the store and change it.

BAS
Come back quickly—

GLICKMAN
In a minute!

PEDDLER (*takes his sack on his shoulders and the coat under his arm.*)
Come.

GLICKMAN (*embarrassed*)
Put it inside, please—the coat in the sack.

PEDDLER
You want it in the sack? Let it be in the sack.
[*Puts the coat inside of the sack. Both go out.*

BAS (*remains alone, walking back and forth across the room. Steps and voices are heard in the corridor.* HURWITZ *enters, followed by another* PEDDLER. HURWITZ *stands still in surprise on seeing* BAS. BAS *is pale and frightened and embarrassed*)
Your friend, Glickman, brought me here. My name is Bas.

HURTWITZ (*also agitated*)

I'm delighted. Sit down. (*To the* PEDDLER.) I'll show it to you right away. (*Looks on the wall.*) Where's the coat? (*Looks at* BAS. BAS *laughs hysterically.* HURWITZ *is agitated.*) What are you laughing at—ha?

PEDDLER

Well? I haven't time.

[*In the corridor steps are heard.* GLICKMAN *enters.*

HURWITZ (*to* GLICKMAN)

Where were you?

GLICKMAN

Down to the store. Bought some cigarettes.

PEDDLER

Well, what's going to be? Are you going to show me the coat or not?

HURWITZ

Right away! Right away! (*To* GLICKMAN.) A peculiar thing! When I went away I left the coat hanging on the wall—I saw it myself— Now it's not here. . . .

[*Looks at* BAS.

GLICKMAN

Well, whose fault is it? When you go out you should lock the door.

BAS (*to* GLICKMAN)

You're an ugly creature!

PEDDLER

Then it seems I came for nothing?

HURWITZ (*guiltily*)

Please excuse me, mister. . . . What can I do? It must have just been stolen . . . hard times!

PEDDLER

The cheek of him! Drags me, drags me from the other street, and what, where—stolen!

GLICKMAN

Here, mister, is a ten-cent-piece for you and go in health!

PEDDLER (*taking the coin gladly*)

Thanks— It would seem there will be bread here, today! (*Sighs.*) Eh—eh—hard times!

[*Goes.*

HURWITZ (*sits down on the bed*)

What times! That one shouldn't be able to borrow a kerbel! (*To* GLICKMAN.) Tell me, you have nothing for a meal at least? . . .

GLICKMAN

What do you mean—I have nothing? Just now I'm rich. I've three whole gilden in my pocket.

HURWITZ

How far will it go for three?

[*Looks at* BAS.

GLICKMAN

Eh! It'll be enough! We'll make a feast at home and it'll be cheaper. Who will go and bring the eats?

BAS

Give me the money. I'll bring it.

GLICKMAN

Here, you have it. (*Hands him several coins.*) Buy two pounds of bread.

BAS

Will that be enough?

HURWITZ

Of course, not enough. I'm as hungry as a dog!

GLICKMAN

Well, buy three pounds of bread, a good herring—but a good one! Tea and sugar for a few kopecs—and cigarettes. And if you have anything left, buy a bit of good cheese.

BAS

We'll see.

[*Goes.*

HURWITZ

It looks as if God punished me . . . I wanted to sell the coat, though it wasn't mine. It belonged to Berman.

GLICKMAN

How do you come by Berman's coat?

HURWITZ

He slept here with me last night. He had no other place to go to. It was a heavy coat and the day was warm, so he went out in his light coat—which he usually wears under his heavy one.

GLICKMAN

Well, never mind, just now the weather is warm.

HURWITZ

Yes—but still I'm sorry! How could I possibly come to want to sell his coat! In great need one forgets even the elementary principles of honesty! But he takes long—that friend of yours—what's his name?

GLICKMAN

His name is Bas, but he's a splendid fellow—somewhat inclined to anarchy, as is usual with a person who hasn't eaten for three days!

[*Steps are heard in the corridor.*

HURWITZ

Here he comes. I'm fearfully hungry. . . .

GLICKMAN

No, it isn't he. Those are not his footsteps.

[BERMAN *walks in with a third* PEDDLER, *dressed like the first one, but somewhat older; he has a sack in his hand; over the other arm hangs a pair of rubbers.*

BERMAN (*to* HURWITZ—*after looking at the wall over the bed*)

Have you seen my coat?

HURWITZ (*stammers*)
The coat?—The coat? I don't know, either. I was looking for it, too.
PEDDLER
Well, make it quicker. I haven't any time to waste.
BERMAN
Yes, yes. . . .
HURWITZ
What do you need the coat for?
GLICKMAN
I suppose to sell it . . . can't you see?
PEDDLER
Well, what's going to be?
BERMAN
I can't understand it. . . .
[*Shrugs his shoulders.*
BAS (*enters. Both arms are filled with paper parcels. He is struck by the expression on the faces about him, throws an angry, significant glance at* GLICKMAN; *throws the parcels on the table*)
Here, eat!
GLICKMAN
And you?
BAS (*angrily*)
I don't want to eat— (*Calls* GLICKMAN *aside.*) Listen, if you don't confess that you sold the coat, I'll not eat!
GLICKMAN
Good! (*To all.*) Brothers—the coat—I sold. I know you won't be displeased!
HURWITZ
Fool, why didn't you say so before?
BERMAN
Sold?—I should worry . . . on the contrary . . . I was

just breaking my head to know what could have become of the thing.

PEDDLER

Well, who's going to pay me for my trip?

GLICKMAN (*to* BAS)

Maybe you've a few kopecs left? Give it to him. . . .

BAS

Not a groschen!

GLICKMAN

I hope you won't mind, mister. Maybe you can use this hat?

[*Takes the hat from the wall.*

HURWITZ

Yes, let him have the hat. I won't wear it any more.

PEDDLER (*takes the hat, examines it, and lays it down again*)

I can't use the hat. It is worth nothing to me.

GLICKMAN

Well, how can we help you? Brothers, let's eat. Bas is a dandy. He's bought a lot of stuff.

HURWITZ (*to* PEDDLER)

Perhaps you would like to dine with us?

PEDDLER (*somewhat embarrassed*)

I guess—what harm can there be? I would really like to take a scrap of herring.

GLICKMAN (*satisfied*)

Ah, so be it. Sit down, mister.

BAS

Maybe you'd like to wash your hands?

HURWITZ

Wait, I'll bring water.

[*Runs out into the corridor with a tin kettle and comes right back with it, filled; the* PEDDLER *washes his hands from the kettle, the water running onto the floor; he makes the blessing; wipes his hands with the tail of his coat, and*

*cuts off a piece of bread with a small, iron knife, also a piece of herring. The others also eat.*

GLICKMAN (*chewing*)

Well, I didn't do so badly?

HURWITZ

Very good . . . no one's complaining.

BERMAN

I, certainly not!

BAS

I, for one, am against such proceedings. To steal, yes, but not that way—there are other ways!

PEDDLER (*wipes his whiskers and prepares to leave*)

Very likely young people—good herring . . . Listen, brothers, I buy second-hand stuff from the rich, but I tell you, one should only deal with such as you. . . .

GLICKMAN

See, and Bas here is dissatisfied with us!

BERMAN

Yes, upon my word, it's a comedy. The only pity is that now I'll have to wear my light coat, and at night it's really a bit chilly.

PEDDLER

Oh, never mind! Young men don't freeze. Once when I was a bachelor, I went about a whole winter through in a summer coat, and if one is destined to live—you see, in spite of everything!

[*Steps are heard.*

HURWITZ

Who is it now?

GLICKMAN (*running to the door*)

Another peddler, I suppose!

BAS

A peddler would have no business here now. The property is already disposed of.

[HANNAH, *a girl of twenty, runs in. She has a rather masculine face, flat bust, and a coarse voice.*

HANNAH

As I live, they're really eating! Gluttons, leave a bite for me! (*Grabs the rest of the bread.*) Not enough! (*Snatches a piece of bread out of* GLICKMAN'S *hand.*) Why have you eaten everything up?

PEDDLER

He-he! The poor girl wants something to eat, too!

HANNAH

Who is this man? Are you trying to make a radical of him, maybe?

BAS

He's a peddler . . . perhaps you've something to sell?

HANNAH

To sell . . . as I live. . . . We should sell him something. . . . Would you buy a ring?

PEDDLER

Ah, why not? I buy everything.

GLICKMAN

Now we'll live, as I'm a Jew!

HANNAH (*takes from her finger a little ring*)

What will you give, mister, for this?

PEDDLER (*examining it*)

A half rouble.

HANNAH

Show the money!

PEDDLER (*Counts out ten copper coins, examines the ring once again.*) It's really not worth that much!

GLICKMAN

It's worth it, mister, it's worth it!

HURWITZ

A question whether it's worth it! A genuine Nahrlin!

HANNAH
A present from my grandmother.
PEDDLER
Let it be a present from a grandfather!
HANNAH
Now we'll feast all over again!
GLICKMAN
Maybe some one else has something to sell? Don't be bashful, brothers.
PEDDLER
On the contrary—hunt up something.
HURWITZ
I have nothing at all.
BERMAN
I, certainly not.
BAS
I, nothing unless it be my soul.
HANNAH
Paupers! Proletarians! (*To* PEDDLER.) Come along, mister. Do you buy rubbers?
PEDDLER (*with pride*)
I told you I buy everything.
HANNAH
Then come. I live just opposite. I have a pair of rubbers that I still have from home. . . . At home, there's often much mud. Here I don't need them. It's dry here.
PEDDLER
Of course, here one doesn't need rubbers. Who wears rubbers here, except, perhaps, a lunatic!
BAS
Why do you buy them then?
PEDDLER
I mean . . . I told you, didn't I, I buy everything.

HANNAH
Come, then.
GLICKMAN
But come right back. . . . Leave the half rouble here with us.
HANNAH
I'll come right back.
[PEDDLER *and* HANNAH *go.*
GLICKMAN
A mighty fine thing, as I live, Hannah should just turn up with a ring and a pair of rubbers.
BAS
What else have you to sell?
[*There is heard the cry of still another* PEDDLER *in the yard.*
GLICKMAN (*with glowing face*)
Oh, I have such a fortunate idea!
BAS
What is it?
HURWITZ
Yes, what?
GLICKMAN (*looking at the bed*)
Why, for instance, do we need the bed?
HURWITZ
Why? To sleep in, of course.
GLICKMAN
The aristocrat! He must sleep in a bed! And to sleep upon the floor, you're too sick?
BERMAN
He knows what he's talking about—the bed is worth at least sixty kopecs!
HURWITZ (*absorbed a moment*)
For my part, let it be sold.
GLICKMAN
Of course! Anyway, it's too narrow for three, and

on the floor four, at least, can sleep comfortably.

BERMAN

He's right, as I live!

HURWITZ (*giving way entirely*)

Well, call in the peddler.

GLICKMAN

Let me.

[*He goes out.*

BAS

I regard you all as abnormal, brothers.

HURWITZ

The whole world is abnormal!

BAS

Yes, yes. . . .

[*A pause.* GLICKMAN'S *voice is heard on the steps: "I'll show you a bed." A gruff voice—the* PEDDLER: *"A bed! Let it be a bed! Everything is merchandise!"*

GLICKMAN (*entering*)

Here is the bed!

PEDDLER (*a very old man, with spectacles—examining the bed*)

The bed is worth nothing! . . . (*All become suddenly depressed.*) Have you nothing else to sell?

GLICKMAN

Nothing at all.

[PEDDLER *goes out.*

CURTAIN

GLOSSARY

Kopec—hundredth part of a rouble.
Kerbel—a rouble.
Gilden—fifteen kopecs.
Groschen—penny.

# "LIARS!"

## *A COMEDY*

BY F. BIMKO

*The dialogue takes place on board the train en route to Kalomai, between a* KALOMAIER, *on his way home, and a* RUSSIAN, *who has just boarded the train.*

THE RUSSIAN
You're going to Kalomai, I believe.
THE KALOMAIER
How did you know I was going to Kalomai?
RUSSIAN
I heard you talking to the conductor. A real Kalomaier or just going there?
KALOMAIER
Really a Kalomaier. What of it?
RUSSIAN
Nothing. Just so. I just ask. A nice town, Kalomai?
KALOMAIER
What do you call a nice town? A town like all other towns in Galicia; a fine town, a very fine town.
RUSSIAN
I mean have you nice people there, rich men?
KALOMAIER
There are all kinds. There are rich, there are poor; naturally more poor than rich.
RUSSIAN
The same as with us; to one rich, no evil eye, a thousand poor. In Kalomai there should be living one Kinkelstein, a very rich man.

KALOMAIER

There is a rich Kinkelstein. What of it; do you know him?

RUSSIAN

I do not know him, but I've heard tell of him. Isn't he called Reb Shiah?

KALOMAIER

Reb Shiah. What of it?

RUSSIAN

Nothing, just so. I just ask. Is he really as rich as they say, this Reb Shiah?

KALOMAIER

Do I know? I haven't counted his money. Why do you inquire so after him? Has it to do with credit perhaps?

RUSSIAN

No, just so. He has, it is said, a daughter.

KALOMAIER

He has three daughters. Aha! about a match, maybe? How much do they say does he give with her, his daughter?

RUSSIAN

It's not a question of dowry here, understand me. We're talking about his house, we are. What sort of house does he have, this Reb Shiah Finkelstein? What sort of home does he run, I mean?

KALOMAIER

What kind of home should it be? A home like all homes, a Jewish house, a fine house, a Schedische, a very fine house. They do say, though, that as regards Jewishness of late—but it's a lie!

RUSSIAN

*What* is a lie?

KALOMAIER

Whatever they may say is a lie. Kalomai, you should know, is a *town* of liars!

RUSSIAN

It would be interesting anyhow to hear what they do say of his house.

KALOMAIER

What they say is, that it isn't any more what it used to be. For instance, formerly they used to celebrate the Passover according to ritual—strict! He himself even used to make a pilgrimage to the Rebbe twice a year—but nowadays—nowadays, it isn't the same any more.

RUSSIAN

And that's all?

KALOMAIER

What did you expect to hear? That he had already cast off his ear-locks and beard and eats pig meat openly?

RUSSIAN

You say "they say," so I thought goodness only knows what they say. But the main thing after all is, is the man himself *a man*. What I mean is, is *he*—this Reb Shiah Finkelstein, I mean—a fine man, reputable, highly respected? That's what I mean.

KALOMAIER

What do you call a fine man? He's a man like other men. Well, how shall I put it? Yes, a really fine person. Though at home they talk—that he *is* a bit of a . . . But it's a lie!

RUSSIAN

What is a lie?

KALOMAIER

Everything they say about him is a lie. Kalomai is such a town. They like to talk about one another, so I don't care to repeat it because you know such talk is already evil.

RUSSIAN

As long as you know it's not so, it is quite harmless to repeat it.

KALOMAIER

Well, they say he is—somewhat of a—swindler!

RUSSIAN

A swindler? Every man is a bit of a swindler. Men swindle. And you don't swindle sometimes?

KALOMAIER

There's a difference between swindling and swindling. Of him they say, you understand me . . . but it's a lie!

RUSSIAN

What, for instance, do they say about him?

KALOMAIER

But I'm telling you it's a lie.

RUSSIAN

I should like to hear the lie though.

KALOMAIER

They say that he has already bankrupted three times, but it's a lie! I know of only once.

RUSSIAN

And that's all? Where have you ever seen a merchant who has not bankrupted? A man, if he stays long enough in business, bankrupts. One trades so long until one overreaches himself. If a man in business dies without having failed it is a sign that he died before his time. What, not so?

KALOMAIER

Everything he calls bankrupt. They say his was a nasty failure,—simply pocketed the money and showed the world—a fig! You understand?

RUSSIAN

No fool apparently. Nu, and nothing else?

KALOMAIER

What more do you want? he should commit a crime, commit murder? There *is* a story going around among us though—a rather ugly tale . . . but it's a lie!

RUSSIAN

What kind of tale?

KALOMAIER

An affair with a Poretz . . . not a word of truth to it!

RUSSIAN

What kind of an affair was it with the Poretz?

KALOMAIER

Some sort of a Poretz out there—notes—do I know what Kalomai can make up? A lie! I know it's a lie!

RUSSIAN

But if you know it's a lie it can't hurt him any.

KALOMAIER

It is said he did business with a Poretz, a very rich Poretz, who made very much of him—very much. In the meantime the Poretz goes and dies. What does Finkelstein do? He presents a couple of notes against the Poretz. The town commenced to boil, I can tell you. How does he come to have notes against the Poretz when he was known never to have signed a paper in his whole life? Kalomai, you should know, is a town that takes note of things.

RUSSIAN

Well?

KALOMAIER

Well, he had a load on his back, I tell you.

RUSSIAN

And is *that* all? Every Jew carries a load on his back. Ever see a Jew without his load to pack?

KALOMAIER

But of him they said he was carrying not one but three loads!

RUSSIAN

Three? What else do they say of him?

KALOMAIER

That he had something to do with a mill. But that is plainly a lie.

RUSSIAN

So the mill burned down, I suppose, and they said that he set fire to it himself, because the mill was an old one anyway and he had her well insured so that he could afterwards erect a new one.

KALOMAIER

But how did you know that that's how it was?

RUSSIAN

I didn't know it, but I just guessed that that's how it must have been.

KALOMAIER

And that's how we gossip in Kalomai, but it's a lie. I could take an oath on it—it's a lie.

RUSSIAN

It doesn't bother me—if it be true. What other pack was he carrying on him did you say?

KALOMAIER

*I* said? The town says. But that surely is a false charge!

RUSSIAN

A false charge—accusation? Counterfeiting, perhaps?

KALOMAIER

Worse!

RUSSIAN

What can be worse?

KALOMAIER

It's a disgrace to repeat the thing Kalomai can make up, upon my word. Empty heads. . . idlers . . . and perhaps, it is just plain blackmail, so they can wring money from him. You know how it is, a small town—and a rich man has enemies.

RUSSIAN

I suppose he had to do with the servant girl.

KALOMAIER

Now how did *you* know? You've already been told?

RUSSIAN

No, I've not been told, but it isn't hard to guess. I suppose it must have cost him a few kreutzer, this little matter of the servant girl, now?

KALOMAIER

May each of us hope to earn it every week, and I wish you no ill, what this cost him, though he was perfectly innocent. A small town—a wealthy man—it goes well with him. They begrudge it to him! They actually begrudge him! . . .

RUSSIAN

Possibly. He has nice children? Three daughters, I think, you said he had.

KALOMAIER

Three. Two married and one still a girl. Fine children, very fine children. They say of the oldest, however, . . . but it's a lie!

RUSSIAN

What do they say of her?

KALOMAIER

But I tell you that it's a lie.

RUSSIAN

I *know* it's a lie, but I would like to hear the lie just the same.

KALOMAIER

If you were a mind to listen to all the lies that go around in Kalomai you would need three days and three nights. Of the oldest they say that she goes about with her own hair and I can bear witness that that's a lie because she isn't such an educated lady at all that she should wear her

own hair. And of the second daughter they actually invented a tale that as a girl she . . . but what Kalomai can't make up! It's a lie!

RUSSIAN

I am really curious to hear what Kalomai can make up.

KALOMAIER

I am telling you that Kalomai is a town of liars and gossips and scandal mongers and long tongues! Don't you know in a small town if a girl goes walking alone at night on the street in the dark with a young man, there is at once a great tara-ram. . . . What business has a young girl to go about in Kalomai at night all alone with a young druggist?

RUSSIAN

And so that's all?

KALOMAIER

What else did you want? She should run away with him in the middle of Yom Kippur to Czernowitz, just as they tell of a little trick the youngest girl played?

RUSSIAN

What trick did the youngest one play?

KALOMAIER

As I live, it's not worth repeating all the *klatcherei* going about among us in Kalomai, and I *do* hate to repeat a lie. . . .

RUSSIAN

You've already repeated so many lies, you can tell one more.

KALOMAIER

I'm not telling my own lies, Reb Yüd! I repeated the lies of others. And anyway I don't understand why you inquire so after each particular person separately like a prosecuting attorney. It seems to me you're a man who loves to worm out of the other fellow—to draw out the very mar-

row of his bones, and all the while you're afraid to drop a word yourself. . . . Don't be offended that I speak so plain. It seems to me you're a Russian and the Russians have in them the ugly habit—they like to crawl into another's heart, boots and all. And the Russians, I see, are no small gossips themselves! Aha, we are nearly there and I must get my things together. I wish you a good . . .

CURTAIN

Note—The oldest daughter was charged with being without the customary wig (shaitel), which a woman is enjoined to wear after marriage so that the locks of maidenhood are not exposed.

# OF AN EARLY MORNING

## *DRAMA*

BY ISAAC LOEB PERETZ

MONASHA, *over seventy years of age; suffers much from his feet; one foot he is compelled to drag after him; he talks to himself constantly, like one accustomed to being always alone.*

CHAIM, *his son, a peddler of old wares; in the forties.*

SHOREH, CHAIM'S *wife, about the same age; peddles with fruit.*

RIFKA, *their daughter; a handy girl 18 or 19 years old.*

LEAH, *her younger sister, about fifteen; mentally undeveloped, anaemic, with a pale prettiness and wide-staring eyes of a child.*

YANKELE, *a babe in the cradle.*

*Scene: A very poor room; in the background are two beds; between the beds, and at the head of one is a cradle; under a badly cracked mirror is a chair with a wash-basin upon it, and underneath the chair is a wash-tub; a towel is thrown over the back of a nearby chair. In the foreground to the right, a door, an oven and a box of coals; a bed, improvised of boards, is supported by a box and reinforced with chairs. To the left, and a little beyond, toward the background, a bed, hidden from view by an old screen and a small table, upon which is a coal-oil lamp; a little further beyond this, a cupboard; in the center of the room, a table,*

*over which hangs a rusted brass lamp; on the table is a little bag, containing a prayer-shawl, a bag, etc. One corner of the room is strewn with sacks and empty baskets (fruit-baskets) which are lined with greenery and twigs; also a miscellaneous assortment of old wares which have been purchased from time to time.*

*It is just before daybreak.* SHOREH *and* LEAH *asleep in the bed, beside which the cradle stands.* SHOREH'S *hand is hanging down listlessly at the side of the bed; she has just been rocking the cradle, and the rocking has not yet died down.* CHAIM *lies on the next bed; he sleeps very restlessly and groans from time to time.* RIFKA *is asleep on the improvised bed; her loosened hair hangs down over the side of the bed.* MONASHA *is already dressed; he sits on the side of his bed in front of the little table and is reciting a prayer very softly and with a melancholy intonation out of a prayer-book. The day begins to gray slowly.* MONASHA *perceives that another day has dawned; he reverently kisses the prayer-book, closes it; stands up very slowly and tries to straighten out his back and shoulders, long set with age and labor; he stands up painfully, supporting himself on the edge of the bed. He looks with tired, weary eyes to the window.*

MONASHA

Once again hast Thou reposed Thy trust in me. . . . I thank Thee and Thy beloved name! (*With a faint, whimsical smile on his pale lips.*) You need me badly here, what, God? You can't get along without me here, ha, Lord? Another midnight prayer You desire I shall rend up to Thee—another chapter of the Psalms from old Monasha? (*Short pause.*) A little short in Jews, maybe? (*He lifts up an understanding but imploring look to Heaven—shaking his head dolefully.*) But as long as You command! (*Takes the screen in his hands and pushes it*

*with great effort, but very quietly indeed, in the direction of the oven. He pauses in the middle of the room with the screen in his hands, and looks at* SHOREH, *shaking his head sadly.*) Her hand hangs down—skin and bone—and veins—and the cradle is still rocking! . . . Doesn't sleep enough! . . . Doesn't eat enough! . . . (*With a look at the window.*) And yet—You bid me live, take the last bite out of her mouth. . . . Well, perhaps, You know better! (*Begins again to drag the screen to the oven, but stops short.*) He's stirring again! the little murderer! (*Hurries over to the cradle and rocks it, crooning faintly: "A-ai—ai—aia"; the baby falls asleep, and he goes back to his screen.*) Cheeks like little apples! Sucks his little lips, the little glutton! The breast—he's dreaming of. . . . No evil eye . . . no evil eye. . . . (*Glancing at the window again.*) Perhaps, it is Thy wish that I'll live to see joy from him yet? Teach him Thy sacred tongue? . . . So be it. (*Sadly.*) But lead him by the hand to the House-of-Study—that I'll not live to do any more! . . . (*Sighs.*) No feet left! . . . (*Drags the screen laboriously but somewhat more hastily toward the oven.* RIFKA *stirs uneasily on her bed.* MONASHA *notices it; leaves off pushing the screen.*) How restless it is, my little one . . . Like her grandmother, may her soul rest in peace—like her to an eye . . . (*Sighs heavily.*) Warm blood—hot blood—and—dreams! . . . God knows what sort of dreams! (*Pause.*) She goes about all day—nothing—by night—dreams! (*Recalling something suddenly.*) My sweet one, why do you throw yourself about so? (*After a short troubled pause.*) She has fallen asleep again—Thrown the blanket half off her. . . . In the house—fearfully cold . . . She is hot . . . hot blood. . . . (*Pause; then calling softly.*) Rifka! (*His voice, however, does not carry.*) To the floor her flaming hair hangs down—like a red

stream—and so must her soul be, too. . . . Like my Leah'le, may her soul rest in peace—like her to an eye—like her grandmother to an eye—to an eye! (*Calls somewhat louder.*) Rifka! (*Goes to her bed and touches her hand gently to awaken her.*) Rifka'le!

RIFKA (*awakens a little—sleepily*)

You, grand-daddy . . . what?

MONASHA

Jump over into my bed.

RIFKA (*yawning*)

Why did you get up so early, grand-daddy?

MONASHA

Did you forget? They have to leave early. . . . Papa picked up a bargain somewhere, and hasn't the money to pay for it. . . . He'll have to get it, somehow. And mamma has some shopping to do for Madam Pimsenholtz—for the wedding.

RIFKA (*yawning*)

Aha, Mania is to be a bride!

[*Catches up the blanket, throws it about her and jumps over into* MONASHA'S *bed.*

MONASHA

Such fire! Like my Leah'le, may her soul rest in peace—like her to a hair.

[*Goes to her and arranges the pillow tenderly under her head.*

RIFKA (*somewhat uneasily*)

Grand-daddy—is the groom called . . . Goldstein?

MONASHA

Goldstein. The grain merchant's son. Go to sleep, Rifka'le. I'll make the tea.

[*Pushes the screen completely over to the oven, shutting off the back part of the room entirely; takes some kindling*

*from the box standing near the oven, splits it up fine, puts it carefully into the oven, pours small bits of coal over it. He lights the fire and puts the kettle on.*

RIFKA (*quietly and steadily*)

Grand-daddy, what's the groom's name—his first name, I mean?

[*She remains silent and* MONASHA *does not reply; he seems not to have heard the question.*

SHOREH (*gets up and goes over into the other bed*)

He's asleep at last! Blessed be His name! (*Wearily and bitterly.*) If one but had an untroubled head! . . . Well, so be it! (CHAIM *opens his eyes and quietly says the morning prayer: "I confess unto Thee . . ."* SHOREH *waits until he has ended the prayer.*) And where are you going to get the money, my wise one?

CHAIM

I'll go to the money lender. . . .

SHOREH

So that he may afterwards draw your blood? . . .

CHAIM

Perhaps I can get it somewhere else. . . .

SHOREH

From one hand to the other! At what percent? (*Pause.*) Father-in-law, please push the screen over this way. (MONASHA *pushes the screen over so that she is hidden from view. She dresses behind the screen.*) Father-in-law, do you know the Pimsenholtz's new connections?

MONASHA

Goldstein? (*Sighing.*) When I had my feet, I used to earn a kerbel now and then from them.

SHOREH (*washing herself behind the screen*)

He is giving two thousand with his son. . . . Pimsenholtz is surely giving enough, too, on his side!

MONASHA

On the bride's side there will be more.

SHOREH (*comes out from behind the screen*)

And who is Goldstein! How long is it since he was just an assistant? . . . And Pimsenholtz—not even worth talking about! . . . But when one only puts his hands to cold water—tries his hands at something—God helps! (*With an angry side-glance at* CHAIM.) But here—may I not sin with my words. . . .

MONASHA

All depends upon Him, blessed be His name!

RIFKA

Mamma, what is his name—the younger Goldstein?

(SHOREH *turns to her in amazement.* JANKELE *stirs in his cradle.* SHOREH *forgets* RIFKA'S *questioning; runs over to the cradle to nurse the baby.*

SHOREH (*irritably*)

Suck, suck my breasts! My murderer! My treasure! My jewel! You'll be the end of me yet! May I only live to hear your first blessing over the milk! (*Recalling* RIFKA'S *question.*) What was that you asked, Rifka? (*There is no reply from* RIFKA.) She's fallen asleep, likely.

CHAIM (*comes out from behind the screen, dressed. To* SHOREH)

And you—haven't a little money?

[MONASHA *pours out two glasses of tea for them.*

SHOREH (*gets up from the cradle; straightens out her back and takes the glass of tea from* MONASHA'S *hand. To* CHAIM)

Where should *I* have it from?

CHAIM (*irritably*)

Couldn't you take something in advance from the Pimsenholtz's?

SHOREH (*hastily supping her tea*)

In advance! If she would only pay afterwards I would be satisfied. . . . She'll drag it out for half a year! (*Pause.*) What sort of a bargain was it you bought! Let's hear.

CHAIM

A dressing-gown, nearly as good as new; three pairs of pants; a velvet jacket—ash gray, still new; a fiddle—the case alone is worth a small fortune; a few packs of cards; some chalk; a card-brush; a silver handle; a white fur. (*Regretfully.*) Some one must have died there at the lady's. She had tears in her eyes.

[*He walks across the room to* RIFKA'S *bed.*

RIFKA (*eagerly*)

Papa, how does young Goldstein look?

CHAIM

What a girl can have on her mind! Better get up. Say your prayers and go to the dressmaker's.

SHOREH (*busy with her baskets, which she is tying together*)

She will not go today. . . . I'll need her later for another job. . . . Let her rest yet. . . . And how much did you offer for the whole lot?

CHAIM (*taking up his sack, into which he has put his lunch, consisting of a piece of bread and an onion, which he has taken from the cupboard.*) I've already told you; six roubles, less twenty-three groschen.

SHOREH

Maybe it *is* really a bargain.

CHAIM

A God-send! (SHOREH *and* MONASHA *look at him in astonishment.*) I bargained and bargained with her—haggled —no use. She wouldn't come down. . . . Suddenly I think to myself—Lord of the world, let me earn a little something . . . !

SHOREH (*recalling something, she strikes her hands together*)

Lord of the world! I forgot to ask you, father-in-law—the doctor from the Brotherhood was here?

MONASHA

Yes. (*Sighs.*) Told me to sleep a lot—to eat plenty—a little wine. . . .

CHAIM (*who is irritated at the interruption—continues*)

And just as I was thinking that, the old lady, all of a sudden, becomes soft as butter!—She began to come down—at first ten pennies, then a gulden at a time—and all of a sudden she turns her face to the wall and sticks out her hand behind her back and says: "Well, Jew, give it here, give!" . . . Her hand shook so I gave her a deposit. (*Throwing the sack over his shoulder, he says probingly, but with an attempt to appear not too serious.*) I think Leah'le should be a partner to the purchase. (SHOREH *looks at him with suspicion. He, braving it out.*) And let her really be a partner . . . she's got her few groschen. . . .

SHOREH (*jumps up as if bitten*)

Ah, you reckoned on that, did you? My poor baby's few groschen that she has saved up running errands! So! With my poor baby's health, with my poor baby's soul, you want to trade. . . .

[CHAIM *waves aside her reproaches as if he could bear no more, and prepares to leave.*

RIFKA (*who has been awakened by the scolding—to* MONASHA *who is standing near her*)

Grand-daddy, why does mamma scold so?

MONASHA (*to* CHAIM)

Sh! Go, go . . . look for a partner elsewhere! "A big crumb is big enough for two birds!" Don't try to swallow the whole world at once.

RIFKA (*persisting*)
Mamma, does young Goldstein wear gold spectacles?
SHOREH
What have you got on your mind? Go to sleep! I'll send for you later.
[*She goes out with the baskets on her arm. There is quite a pause.*
RIFKA
Grand-daddy, where does Goldstein live?
MONASHA (*mechanically*)
On the same street with us—in the big house.
RIFKA
He wears gold spectacles?
MONASHA
Maybe—when I used to see his father, he was a near-sighted lad—I suppose now he wears glasses, and, I suppose, gold ones. . . .
RIFKA
In the big house he lives? In the big one?
MONASHA
Yes, their house. . . . Why do you ask?
RIFKA
Look, grand-daddy. (*She takes out of her bosom a photograph and holds it up to him with trembling fingers.*) I found this—yesterday—in the street. . . .
MONASHA (*takes it and looks at it carefully*)
That's he—young Goldstein. (*Doubtingly.*) You found it in the street?
RIFKA (*she doesn't reply. Her face is turned to the wall. After a little her smothered sobs escape*)
MONASHA (*frightened*)
Lord of the world!—What is it? What ails you, Rifka—Rifka'le—She doesn't answer!—How you tremble! Don't you feel well? Is your heart heavy? . . . Rifka'le, shall

I give you some tea? . . . Lord of the world, how she trembles! How pale she is! . . . I'll call in some one—a doctor—any one. . . . (*Calls frantically.*) Leah! Leah!

LEAH (*awakens*)

What is it, grandpa?

MONASHA

Rifka has fainted, I think. . . . Go to her . . . I'll go call some one.

[*He runs out.*

[LEAH *snatches up the blanket and covers herself with it. She starts to cross the room to* RIFKA. *Midway, however, she forgets her errand; begins to hum softly to herself—forgets the melody; stands still, as if trying to recall something; mechanically she puts her hand to her blouse and feels something there; something hard; it surprises her; she can't make out what it would be; feels for it again with her hand and finally takes out of her blouse a silver rouble; she smiles into its reflection.*

LEAH

A little mirror! (*Then she recalls her errand and goes over to* RIFKA'S *bed.*) Look, Rifka! Rifka—Rifka! (*Showing her the rouble.*) Rifka, are you dead? Open your eyes, Rifka! If you don't they'll bury you . . . Rifka . . .

RIFKA

They have already . . . buried me! . . .

LEAH (*jumps back frightened*)

It's a lie! You're at home—in bed! When they bury one, they put them into the ground . . . far . . . far from here. (*She grows quiet, then suddenly remembers the rouble again.*) See! Do you know who gave it to me? A young man—a strange young man, I think—in a shining hat. . . . He's stopping at the inn. . . . Rifka, you hear? I was going by and he spied me through the window. . . . He beckoned to me so I went in. . . . He gave

me a rouble and a kiss. . . . "Come tomorrow," says he, "then I'll give you two. You'll go away with me on a ship, and every day I'll give you a rouble. . . . Far . . . far . . . we'll go!" He asked me if I had a sister. So I said, "yes" . . . and if she was pretty. . . . (*Pause. She forgets again what she was thinking of—then suddenly asks.*) What does he mean, Rifka? What does he want, Rifka? (*Tugs at her sleeve.*) Rifka! . . .

PEDDLER (*peering in boldly through the window*) Peddler! Peddler! Peddler!

CURTAIN

# THE SISTERS

## *COMEDY*

BY ISAAC LOEB PERETZ

---

MIREL, *a widow with children; prematurely aged.*
LEAH, NACHAMA } *her sisters; servants;* LEAH *is slightly older than* NACHAMA.
AVREMEL, MIREL'S *son; a young boy, student at a religious school.*
ZORACH, *a shoemaker's apprentice.*
MOSCHEL, *a surgeon's assistant.*
*A woman's voice from a window.*

*Scene: A remote corner of a city square; center of stage a clump of bushes. In front of the bushes a narrow path leading into a broader path, from which various smaller paths diverge deep into the background. Behind the bushes is a park bench, and close to it, but nearer toward the right, a lamp-post; the lamp is burning. To the left, and just outside of the public square is seen a row of houses.*

*It is a cool autumn evening. There are lights in the windows of the various houses at left. The nearest to the corner is more brilliantly lighted. The corner of the square, where the action takes place, lies in a soft shadow, but the space immediately around the lamp is brilliantly illumined. From*

*the appearance of the sky, it can readily be observed that the heart of the square is well illuminated. Voices are heard —but indistinctly—coming from the center of the square, as are also light laughter and happy little screams, which grow gradually less and less. Upon the rise of the curtain the scene grows more quiet and peaceful.*

MIREL *and* AVREMEL (MIREL *is sitting upon the bench; from time to time she looks impatiently about her to see if any one is approaching.* AVREMEL *leans against her, whimpering*)

MIREL (*soothingly*)

Sh! Sh! Avremel! They will come soon—then we'll decide about tomorrow. (*Smiling sadly.*) Do you know what day tomorrow is, my jewel?

AVREMEL (*raising his face to hers*)

I know. The anniversary of my father's death, may his soul rest in peace. (*He straightens up and looks piously heavenward.*) May his merits shield us!

MIREL

That's right, that's right, my life, my little orphan. And we will go out to his grave tomorrow.

AVREMEL

They, too?

MIREL (*uneasily*)

Of course, as every year. But I haven't earned a farthing today, and you haven't had a mouthful yet.

AVREMEL

I am not hungry, mamma.

MIREL (*shaking her head dubiously*)

Of course, of course. But a piece of bread and a little apple. . . . Maybe the aunties will bring something good.

AVREMEL

Then we'll take it home to Sarel.

MIREL
There'll be enough for all.
AVREMEL
I am not hungry—indeed, I'm not, mamma. (MIREL *glances at him nervously.*) I feel cold, mamma, let me go home.
MIREL
You are cold, my treasure, my Kaddish? Here is my shawl. Take and put it around you.
[*She removes the shawl from her shoulders.*
AVREMEL
I don't want it. You will be cold.
MIREL
No, my gold, I am not cold. (*She wraps the shawl about him.*) I am used to it. And your Aunt Nachama said she would go with you to the physician.
AVREMEL
She doesn't need to bother herself!
MIREL (*anxiously*)
Why? One must have strength to study the Torah—one must be well.
AVREMEL
If God wills that I be well . . .
[*Breaking off abruptly.*
MIREL
Well, what then, my little Kaddish?
AVREMEL (*blurts out*)
Perhaps He has holier disciples than . . .
MIREL
Foolish child, the doctor himself is a very pious Jew.
AVREMEL
I don't mean him . . .
MIREL
You don't want to go with your Aunt Nachama?

AVREMEL
No.
MIREL (*coaxingly*)
You little fool, one may properly go with an aunt.
AVREMEL
But I don't want to.
MIREL (*trying to hide a patient little smile*)
What then, Avremel, do you want? But study—you do want?
AVREMEL (*with pride*)
I want to study.
MIREL
And the rabbi's fees?
AVREMEL (*cast down*)
Yes, yes, the rabbi's wife spoke to me already about it.
MIREL
The hussy—may her name be wiped out!
AVREMEL
Mamma, don't curse. Papa, may his soul rest in peace, didn't like it when one cursed.
MIREL
I only meant—what's her hurry? Maybe your aunts will bring something today yet—enough to pay something on account, perhaps.
AVREMEL
Jechevid needs shoes.
MIREL
The teacher's fee is first.
AVREMEL
And Saril's dress is torn.
MIREL
First of all—the teacher's fee.
AVREMEL (*breaking out*)
But from such money!

MIREL (*trembling*)

What are you saying? Have you heard something evil—from the fellows at school—those idlers!

AVREMEL (*hurt*)

My companions are not idlers. They are students of the Torah—and they heard it from their mothers.

MIREL

What did they hear—what?

AVREMEL

That—they run about with beaus—were seen promenading with them.

MIREL (*relieved*)

So? I'll show them! I'll talk to them. But all that has nothing to do with you, Avremel.

AVREMEL (*angrily*)

It *is* my affair. In another month I'll be laying tefillin, blessed be His Name, and I don't want—I don't want to see them.

MIREL

Not Aunt Nachama, either? But you used to love her so.

AVREMEL

Mamma, let me go home.

MIREL (*feelingly*)

Go, go. Don't let me see your face. Go, go. I'm so anxious! (AVREMEL *goes out right; she calls after him.*) Have the fire made. I'll bring home some potatoes.

AVREMEL (*turning to her as he walks away*)

But you haven't earned anything today, mamma. Will they trust you?

MIREL

None of your affairs. Wherever I'll get it, I'll get it.

AVREMEL

And I'll not eat.

MIREL
Will you go? I'll let out my whole bitter heart on you!
AVREMEL
I'm going, I'm going! (*Singing as he leaves.*)
"What is man but dust and clay—
To worms a prey—"
(*He disappears in the distance, but his voice can still be heard singing.*)
"Today full of mirth,
Tomorrow 'neath the earth
Both deaf and dumb—
What is man?"
MIREL (*who has been strangely moved by the song*)
My jewel, my orphan! Not far from the tree falls the apple! Like his father, may his soul rest in peace, to an eye!
[LEAH *appears at right.*
LEAH
Good evening.
MIREL (*not over-cordially*)
Good year.
LEAH
And where is Avremel?
MIREL
He was here—went home.
LEAH
Couldn't wait, poor little thing.
MIREL
He was cold.
LEAH
Then, I'll come to you tomorrow before he goes to the Bes Ha-Midrash.
MIREL (*crisply*)
He leaves before daybreak.

LEAH (*astonished at the tone she looks searchingly at her sister*)
And where is the little shawl, Mirel? (*Sadly.*) Pawned?
MIREL
No. Wrapped Avremel in it.
LEAH
He coughs, poor little thing!
MIREL
He coughs, of course—
LEAH
Then I'll go to him in the school-room. (MIREL *is silent.* LEAH *suddenly reminds herself.*) Oh, tomorrow is the anniversary. When do we go out to the grave?
MIREL
Around nine o'clock.
LEAH
Then I'll stop there on my way back.
MIREL
It isn't necessary.
LEAH (*uneasily*)
What is it?
MIREL
I hear fine things about you—both of you.
LEAH
From you, Mirel!
MIREL
From his school-boys. It has already traveled that far! Oil will rise to the top of the water!
LEAH (*bolstering up her courage*)
Doesn't the match suit them?
MIREL
But is it a match? Is it settled between you?
LEAH (*angrily*)
None of your grandmother's concern!

MIREL

Of course, blacken, blacken me up some more. I daren't go across the market-place any more!

LEAH

Maybe you would put your lamentations off for tomorrow. Mind me, better keep quiet.

MIREL

And if I do, will the world keep quiet, too?

LEAH

My sacrifice—the world!

MIREL

And God—will He remain silent?

LEAH

I told you more than once—don't come between me and God. Leave me alone. If God has any complaints to make against me, well—maybe I have a few to make against Him, too!

MIREL

What kind of talk is that!

LEAH (*does not answer her but goes right on*)

And for every complaint of His, I have ten excuses! Better take what I have brought you. Here. (MIREL *makes no move to take them, and* LEAH *places the things on the bench.*) First of all, the wax for the soul-lights . . .

MIREL (*touched*)

Did *you* think of it?

LEAH (*shrugging her shoulders*)

They bought honey, so the wax was left.

MIREL (*stubbornly*)

I don't need any wax.

LEAH

Nonsense. Have you a soul-light, then?

MIREL

Rather none at all than from stolen wax.

LEAH

I don't steal. And anyway—there's more than that coming to me from them. They suck the marrow from my bones! From my life—my soul!

MIREL

I won't take the wax.

LEAH

Then don't. Let it lie there. And here is a package of tea, a little sugar. For Avremel, especially, a cookie to take to school with him. We baked it for the guest to take along on his trip, so I took one for Avremel. And, yes, a little money.

[*Extends the palm of her hand with a few pieces of silver.*

MIREL (*suspiciously*)

So much! When did you draw your wages last?

LEAH

I told you. They had a guest and he left it for me.

MIREL

So much?

LEAH (*goaded to anger*)

Snake!

MIREL

Leah, just so—left it for nothing at all?

LEAH

For nothing at all! Didn't I slave enough before he left! Oh, snake! snake! When *you* sting it goes deep to the heart! And that is a sister—an elder sister! Not enough that they—she must also trample with her feet! Maybe you haven't enough—so here is more for you! (*She sinks down upon the bench.*) Mirel, how can a person have so little pity? See, what I have come to! A respectable daughter—a mother's own child—now exposed to the mercy of strangers. Whoever wishes—spits in your face!

MIREL

Don't run around with surgeons' assistants, then!

LEAH

Oh, they aren't the worst. Your pious ones are worse yet! Listen, I didn't want to tell you, but you draw my blood from me—well, then, here, take a little more. (*Half sobbing.*) Slaved far into the night for the guest. "It won't hurt you," says the old witch, "when the betrothal takes place, you'll earn a bit." A widower he is—came to look at the darkey, the puffed up thing with the calf's eyes. There's to be a betrothal! In the meantime—slave! I work until I am ready to drop! Tea and tea again, and a little brandy, and something on top of it. Run! Snatch! Carry! Carried may they be on their biers, Lord of the world! There's no end! Even the sinners in Hell rest sometimes. At last, God be praised! It's three o'clock in the morning! I could hardly crawl back to my kitchen. So tired, I even forgot to turn the lamp out! My head was swimming so! My atonement may she be, the old witch! Let her deduct the oil from my wages. She's already informed me she would. May her mouth be drawn to the back of her head forever! But that's not the point. I fall in a heap onto my bed—in my skirt, in my shoes and stockings. I barely manage to remove my waist. I lie there with wide-open eyes—exhausted. I hear the clock in the other room strike half past three, four, half past four, five—then, I doze off. He's here!

MIREL (*frightened and shocked*)

The bridegroom?

LEAH

That much cheek you want him to have yet? Isn't it sufficient that all day long he kept shooting his amorous glances on my face, my bosom, from under his half-shut eyelids—behind his girl's crooked shoulders! When he

tipped me he pressed my hand! May it press him under his heart, Lord of the world! No, *he* came—Reb *Ya-ka-leh,* himself. . . .

MIREL (*stunned*)

What did *he* want?

LEAH

Ha-ha-ha! What did he want? What does a man always want? I awoke! He bends over me, his thick nose quivering! His breath sears! He snorts like a horse! His earlocks trailing over my bosom like creeping worms. . . . (*She springs up suddenly.*) But I cooled my heart off on him, never fear! An ale-house does he think it is! With all my five fingers—into him! It rang through the place! (*She sinks upon the bench.*) That is how we are considered by them! To them, we are not even human beings! You haven't any rights over yourself! Then—you come along and you trample with your feet, too. . . . (*Beside herself.*) Upon my body—upon my soul!

MIREL (*grabbing her hand*)

Sh! Some one's coming!

[*At right appear* NACHAMA *and* ZORACH *arm-in-arm.*

NACHAMA (*as she sees her sisters she withdraws her arm from* ZORACH'S)

Now disappear for a bit, Zorach.

ZORACH

Till tomorrow?

NACHAMA

Not tomorrow. Tomorrow is the anniversary of the death of Mirel's husband. We all go to the grave.

ZORACH (*contemptuously*)

A great necessity!

NACHAMA

Leah insists. And what of it?

ZORACH

Such a pious soul!

NACHAMA

Pious—I should say! Begot children and then laid himself down and died! Come back later. Adieu. (*He tries to kiss her—she breaks away.*) Glutton! Take a walk in the square. I'll call you.

ZORACH

When the pious lady leaves?

NACHAMA

Zorach! She is my sister!

ZORACH

Not another word out of me, not another word. Adieu.

[*He goes off right. She approaches her sisters.*

NACHAMA

Good evening.

LEAH

Good year.

[*Kisses her.*

NACHAMA (*to* MIREL)

And doesn't it suit you to answer? (*Not waiting for a reply.*) And where is Avremel?

LEAH

Mirel says he was here but went away again. He felt cold. He coughs.

NACHAMA

Poor little thing. And I did so want to see him. I hear him praised so. My boss blesses himself to have sons like him. At supper, I sit in the kitchen and hear how he scolds his sons and lectures them. It made me feel so good. I melted up like butter. "Avremel," says he, "is a genius—absorbs the holy Torah like a sponge." A pity he isn't here, I would kiss every bone in his little body!

MIREL

You have, blessed be His Name, whom to kiss. He, Avremel, doesn't want to be kissed!

NACHAMA (*wantonly*)

When he gets older, he'll know better.

MIREL

May your mouth be paralyzed, Lord of the world!

NACHAMA

Hold your mouth, priestess!

LEAH

Now, now, start something!

NACHAMA

Do I answer her, even? (*To* MIREL.) Here. Better take something.

[*She removes various articles from her pockets.*

MIREL

Only hurry! Your hand trembles! You must get rid of me in a hurry! I am interrupting your pleasure with that shoemaker fellow!

NACHAMA (*throwing everything upon the bench*)

You'll not get a word out of me! Tomorrow at the grave I'll listen to your complaints. Adieu. (*To* LEAH.) We will come back again. Wait for us.

MIREL

"We—us!" We've come to something! A nice world!

NACHAMA

Do you know what, Mirel? Mind me, marry me off. Loosen the knot in your handkerchief. Don't stint on the dowry, the presents, the wedding outfit! Send for the musicians! Dance toward me with the wedding-loaf! Let it be with any one as long as it's a man! Have you the money? Can you do it? No? Then shut your mouth!

[*She disappears at right.*

MIREL (*stands up, about to go away*)

LEAH (*holding her back by the dress. She speaks feebly*)
Wait a bit. Sit a while yet with me. I'm afraid to stay here alone!

MIREL
Go home, then.

LEAH (*bitterly*)
Home! Home— I would gladly go—

MIREL (*touched*)
A person doesn't have to go home exactly—but wherever fate has destined for him.

LEAH (*after a short pause*)
And there is no one there, either. They went to escort the merchant, the bridegroom to the train. They will return late—and I'm afraid—all alone. The gloomy kitchen lamp—the shadows on the old, peeling walls. . . .

MIREL
Better be afraid of God! Be afraid of your sins!

LEAH (*unheeding*)
And always alone!— Always alone—

MIREL
Always?

LEAH
How you can sting! How without pity you are!

MIREL
And on Nachama—do *you* take pity? You drown, so you let her drown, too! Alone, you're afraid! You want to have it lively—so you pull her down, too!

LEAH
I don't pull any one down. Each one has his right over himself, his own will, his own heart. Each keeps his own accounts! And I, God forbid, am not drowning yet. . . .

MIREL
Of course not! You're very lucky, of course! Everybody envies you! Everybody blesses you! Matchmakers wear

away your door-step! Such a pious lady! And what will your end be, Leah?

LEAH

The end! It is very far from the end. And what should the end be?

MIREL (*sitting again*)

And why are you as white as the wall? And what are those red blotches on your face? And what do those blue-black rings around your eyes mean? And your swollen eyelids? And what is the meaning of the fever that is burning in your eye? And why are your cheeks so sunken? And that fear of yours—to be alone? And the melancholy?

LEAH

You expect me to shine like the sun? Such a sweet fate —a person slaves. . . .

MIREL

Don't try to throw sand in my eyes. You've been working a good while already and but just now you blossomed like a rose, played like a bird!

LEAH

When?

MIREL (*mercilessly*)

Before—before the surgeon's assistant threw you over.

LEAH (*sinking weakly onto the bench—her head thrown back*)

And that you know, too? And am I to blame for that, too?

MIREL

*I*—surely not! For nothing one isn't thrown over. But, of course, when one is satisfied without the marriage ceremony—there must be such an end!

LEAH

Oh, how pitiless you are! A sister—the same flesh and

blood—and to be so pitiless! To be so merciless! Why do you pour salt on my wounds? Why pour more oil on a burning flame! You are my Angel of Death! How can a human being be so pitiless?

MIREL

And you—have you pity on yourself? And what is the end going to be? The whole town is ringing with your doings! They won't let you into a Jewish house!

LEAH

Why? Don't I work hard enough? Am I sick or lazy? The rest is none of their worry!

MIREL

They will make it their worry—when it comes out like oil upon the water. No honest woman will allow you to cross her threshold, especially where there are growing children! She wouldn't dare! She would sin away her years if she did! Even their servants they want respectable—kosher . . .

LEAH (*brokenly*)

It can't be. It dare not be. God commands no one to execute an own sister! I know your heart is embittered, my poor sister, and that you have to pour it out on some one, but I beg you—not on me. I have no more strength left. I am broken—without joy . . . (*Weeping.*) Three sisters. One a widow with hungry, bare-foot little swallows, two forsaken little orphans! And even admitting that I am—even if I were—not so—so pious—a kosher child, still you are my sister, an older sister! People have lied about me . . . a villain on the highway corrupted me—thrust a knife into my heart. See, how the blood flows—your sister's blood! What if the people do laugh in derision! They are strangers—but you—a sister—an older sister . . . (MIREL *remains silent—stony.*) Without a spark of pity! Let it be so! Perhaps it must be so! Good night.

[LEAH *rises to go.* MIREL *struggles with herself, relents, and is about to call her back, but just at this moment* LEAH *comes under the glare of the lamp-light and for the first time* MIREL *gets a clear view of her. She begins to tremble and screams out hoarsely.*

LEAH (*very frightened*)

What is it?

MIREL

Here! Come here! This minute, come here!

LEAH (*very frightened, but obedient like a whipped dog*)

I'm coming. I'm coming. Don't scream so.

[*Her feet are about to give way under her but she makes an attempt to obey.*

MIREL

This minute! You hear!

LEAH (*barely able to move for fright, she drags herself back to the bench*)

Sh! Sh! People will hear!

MIREL (*observing her more closely, she strikes her hands together in horror*)

Oi! Oi! May lightning strike me! God's punishment! Round! Round like a barrel! You're standing there, yet? You wicked woman! Away! (LEAH *stands as if glued to the spot—unable to move.*) Away from my eyes! You—you—away! And tomorrow to the grave—you dare come! Not you, not she—neither of you! Nobody! (*Throwing the little offerings of the sisters out of her pockets.*) You won't leave? (*To herself.*) Then I'll go!

[*She walks off rapidly, then breaks into a run, disappearing at right.*

[LEAH *can hardly reach the bench, but finally manages to sink down upon it, weary and broken. With great effort she pulls her feet up on the bench under her, lying huddled together.* MOSCHEL *comes along, whistling.*

MOSCHEL (*entering jauntily*)

What a strange piece of goods is lying there on the bench!

[*Goes toward the bench, recognizes* LEAH *and is anxious to withdraw.*

LEAH (*who has observed him, however, without emotion*)

It's you, ha? Come here, closer.

MOSCHEL

I'm in a hurry.

LEAH

I have something to tell you.

MOSCHEL (*uneasily*)

But I beg of you—no lamentations. And I have a great deal of work to do yet. I just ran out to buy some cigarettes. They're waiting—

[*He is eager to be off but dare not go.*

LEAH (*contemptuously*)

Cigarettes are sticking out of your pocket.

MOSCHEL

You see how my head is muddled. Forgot all about them.

LEAH

I know that you forget.

MOSCHEL

When one is so busy . . .

LEAH

I will not detain you long. But there's something I must tell you!

MOSCHEL

Very well, say it. But I tell you before—no insults. We are, blessed be His Name, none too pious—either of us!

LEAH

God forbid! Only—I have good tidings for you. . . .

MOSCHEL

That you are about to become a bride?

LEAH

Not that exactly—but—congratulations are coming to me, anyway, and—to you, too. God, blessed be He, (*She points to her person.*) has made me—fruitful. . . .

MOSCHEL (*with rascally humor*)

Not He, Leah. That is my blessing, if I am not mistaken.

LEAH

No. You are not mistaken.

MOSCHEL

Then there are congratulations really coming to us!

LEAH

And nothing more?

MOSCHEL

Do you know what, Leah, I know a physician, an acquaintance of mine. . . . He'll do it for me for nothing. I will go to him myself and get what is needed.

LEAH

Nothing more?

MOSCHEL

What more do you expect, Leah? Can two corpses dance together?

LEAH

Well, go! As long as you know—go.

MOSCHEL

I will come back, Leah—in half an hour, an hour. Will you wait?

LEAH (*coldly*)

No.

MOSCHEL

Then I'll come to you. We will talk it over.

LEAH

No, go. Some one is coming.

MOSCHEL

As you wish.

[*He leaves hastily.*

LEAH (*to herself*)

And I loved that! Oh, women, women! You are worth throwing to the dogs!

[*She collapses.*

[*Enter* NACHAMA *and* ZORACH.

ZORACH

Good evening, Leah!

[*She does not respond.*

NACHAMA (*bending over her in surprise. She raises her head quickly, very much frightened*)

Leah, what is the matter with you? Don't you feel well?

LEAH (*faintly*)

No.

NACHAMA

Just look at your face, Leah!

LEAH

My teeth . . . I mean my head aches so! (*Very low.*) I don't know what I am saying. (*Trying to rouse herself.*) My head aches so—a dreadful headache!

NACHAMA

Oh, don't try to fool me, Leah. He was here! The surgeon's assistant! (LEAH *is silent; she is trembling.*) He was here! He was here! What did he say to you?

LEAH

Nothing. He said nothing. I said something to him.

NACHAMA

Did you give it to him good? That's right! May his name be blotted out! This morning, when I came out, he was standing on the other side of the square with the blonde Miriam, whispering to her, squeezing her hand. She has a paw like a bear!

LEAH (*very wearily*)
My worry . . .
NACHAMA (*dubiously*)
Is that so?
ZORACH (*to himself*)
That is what I call a splendid girl! You've had enough? Very well. Go your way in health!
NACHAMA
What are you mumbling about there, Zorach?
ZORACH
I said—he's a scoundrel!
[LEAH *crying quietly.*
NACHAMA
Wait till I get him into my hands! He is already edging up to me. He squeezes the blonde's hand and smiles at me. He's been trying for a long time to make up to me. It will be a black wedding-canopy for him! I'll pay him off—for everything! Wait!
ZORACH (*reproachfully*)
Nachama!
NACHAMA
Quiet—you! I know what I'm talking about.
ZORACH
But I won't stand for it.
NACHAMA
You have no rights over me yet. It is still before the wedding ceremony!
LEAH
When is it to be?
NACHAMA
When long Thursday falls on short Friday.
LEAH
Ah! You, too!

ZORACH

But Nachama, how you talk! You don't compare me with that charlatan!

NACHAMA

All dogs have one bite! But it's none of your affairs!

ZORACH

Well, well, we'll see. Just let him come near you. I'll stick an awl into his dirty heart.

NACHAMA (*laughing*)

Well, that wouldn't be bad!

LEAH

I would like to speak to you about something, Nachama.

NACHAMA (*sitting down beside her*)

Speak, speak. (*She puts her arms about her sister and kisses her.*) Speak, my soul. Get it off your heart.

LEAH

Not that. I want to talk to you—by yourself—under four eyes, Nachama.

NACHAMA

Do you hear, Zorach? The devil take you for a while!

ZORACH

For how long, my crown?

NACHAMA

None of your sweet speeches! Until I call you.

ZORACH

As you say.

[*He paces slowly back and forth down the pathway but not out of sight of the bench.*

NACHAMA (*to* LEAH)

My Zorach! He's as faithful as a dog!

LEAH

*Is* he yours?

NACHAMA

Of course, mine. He hangs about me!

LEAH
For how long?
NACHAMA
I say, "Blessed be Thy Name from day to day." For tomorrow, let God worry!
LEAH
God wishes each to care for himself.
NACHAMA (*jumps up*)
Another lecture! You, too!
LEAH
And what of tomorrow—when he has had enough?
NACHAMA
He won't get enough, and if yes—let him go to the devil! To the four winds!
LEAH
Don't you want to marry him?
NACHAMA
Do I know? When I see Mirel's luck. . . .
LEAH
Not all wives become widows.
NACHAMA (*pondering*)
True. The devil wouldn't take Zorach in a hurry! But has Aunt Baileh got it any better? She has a husband—but with eight children! But as to that one can help oneself. There are means—
LEAH
What are you saying, Nachama?
NACHAMA
What everybody else says.
LEAH
One dare not . . .
NACHAMA
Oh, as to the things one dare not do! When one has the choice, one does the thing he most wants to do. And when

one hasn't any choice, one does what one can. My pious mistress almost kicked off! She didn't want her fifth.

LEAH

And God punishes when one sins! He has already punished me! Oh, and how He has punished me! Nachama, you don't know how God can punish—so that one recoils from one's self as if one were an ugly creeping thing!

NACHAMA (*jocularly*)

Leah, keep the rest for tomorrow!

LEAH

Why tomorrow?

NACHAMA

Tomorrow—out on the sacred place.

LEAH

We will not go to the cemetery tomorrow.

NACHAMA

But tomorrow is the anniversary, and we go every year to his grave.

LEAH

Not tomorrow. Mirel doesn't want it.

NACHAMA

Who listens to her? (*Uneasily.*) And why doesn't she want it?

LEAH

She says that we would . . . dishonor the grave.

NACHAMA (*distracted*)

I haven't done anything wrong yet, Leah!

LEAH

Sooner or later—you will. Our lives lie on the edge—ever downward. . . .

NACHAMA (*defiantly*)

And if I want to—I will—do all the wicked things, and I wouldn't listen to any one, not Mirel and not even you!

LEAH

Nachama!

NACHAMA (ZORACH *appears again in the pathway; she calls him. He goes to her*)

Am I a pretty girl, Zorach?

ZORACH

As pretty as the sun!

NACHAMA

Do you love me?

ZORACH

As my life!

NACHAMA

Ardently, fiercely?

ZORACH

Even as the fires of Hell!

NACHAMA

And when you steal a kiss?

ZORACH

My blood boils up like pitch! I get drunk from your kisses!

NACHAMA

And a wedding-canopy—you will provide? If not—not! The devil with you and the rabbi together! May they be a sacrifice for me! For whom have I to wait—except for a dried-up, pious, goody-goody, who'll soak himself in the Mikvah, beget a lot of children, say "ta-ta" and take himself off to the next world and leave one a widow with children.

[LEAH *is about to speak, but there is heard a woman's voice calling from a window of a nearby house.*

THE VOICE

Nachama! Where are you, Nachama! The samovar is boiling over, and she goes promenading! The hussy! May your

name *only* come home! Nachama! May you break your legs! Nachama! Are you coming home, Nachama?

NACHAMA (*restraining her temper with difficulty*)

Oh, if it were not for Mirel and her little swallows I'd give her a stone in her head! I'd make a heap of that witch, I would! (*Aloud.*) I'm coming. (*To* ZORACH.) Wait for me here till I come back. Don't leave her alone, you hear?

[*Goes.*

ZORACH

With the greatest of Haman's rattles. (*Cooling off somewhat.*) Only let there be plenty of work! (*He sits down beside* LEAH.) Well, little Leah!

LEAH

Without endearments, please. I'm not "little Leah" to you.

ZORACH

Well, then, Leah, big, beautiful Leah!

LEAH (*as if to herself*)

Three sisters—three unfortunate sisters! One a widow with poor little hungry ones! The second, a lost one! The third—on the brink of slipping. . . . Oh, what a world! What a world!

ZORACH (*laughing*)

Now, now. The world is not such an ugly place. If there were only more work! And the risk is not so great! Never mind, there are plenty of surgeons' assistants around!

LEAH (*rousing herself*)

Oh, it's you, Zorach!

ZORACH

Who else?

LEAH (*pondering very deeply*)

Listen, Zorach . . .

ZORACH
What do you want, big, lovely Leah?

LEAH
Me—you love, too?

ZORACH
Of course. How can one help loving you?

LEAH
And Nachama?

ZORACH
What has one to do with the other?

LEAH (*amazed*)
Both at one time?

ZORACH
Why, I don't know myself just how it is—but it is so. Listen. Nachama draws me as with tongs—like a magnet! Her hair, her tumbled hair—flame and fire! And eyes! Like burning coals! And when she speaks my heart jumps! The sound of her voice! her lips! her cheeks—like apples! But you don't have to envy her any, Leah! You aren't exactly lacking anything, either, blessed be His Name. You think him clever, don't you—the surgeon's assistant? May he have as much luck as brains! A prettier and a better than you, the world doesn't possess. He will lie at your feet yet! He'll come back!

LEAH (*wearily*)
Let him go.

ZORACH
You will forgive him. You think you're a lost sheep. It's not so bad. Such things happen after the wedding, too, and in the best of families—even with Chassidim. May it not happen as it sometimes does! He'll be better by and by. He'll come to his senses and will become even more faithful than ever.

LEAH
And you, Zorach?
ZORACH
I?
LEAH
Are you faithful to Nachama?
ZORACH
Of course!
LEAH
Do you love her honestly?
ZORACH
And how I love her! If I don't see her for a day I think the sun didn't rise! That it wasn't day at all! And the night —the yearning at night! And such dreams as I dream— as if pitch and tar were burning! Can you understand it, Leah?
LEAH
And will you marry her?
ZORACH (*his enthusiasm waning*)
I told you it is impossible for "two corpses to go dancing."
LEAH (*trembling*)
You—did *you* say that?
ZORACH
Every one says it. If there were work, then well and good. . . .
LEAH
And before then?
ZORACH
Before then? Just as *she* desires.
LEAH
And you will help her to desire.
ZORACH (*uncomfortably*)
I don't understand you, Leah.
[*There is a considerable pause.*

LEAH

I have a request to make of you, Zorach.

ZORACH

Ask anything. I'd go through fire and water for you!

LEAH

No need to go as far as that. I only ask you not to make my sister unfortunate—not to—don't . . .

ZORACH

I—make Nachama unfortunate!

LEAH

Don't lead her astray. She is so very young yet and you are—young, too. . . . And when the temptation takes hold of one—even God is forgotten, Zorach, and the world! Zorach, have pity on her youth and on yourself, too, and on your love—and—Zorach—I don't know how to say it but I must. . . . Such wares are easily had in the town. . . .

ZORACH

No, Leah, don't say that! Once, yes—but since I have known Nachama and you I have kept away from sinful acts. I have become better. Nachama is pure. You, too, Leah. You, it seems to me, especially so. There never were two such girls as you in this world! There are no others—both you and Nachama! If it were not Nachama—who can tell? She with her joyousness, with her fun, with her pranks! She seethes, the earth trembles under her feet—a torch lights up the universe! And then you—with your gentleness, with your sweetness—and (*Looking deep into her eyes.*) You—with your gentle sadness, that looks out of your eyes, and your pallor—a lady, upon my soul, a true lady! I wouldn't give your little nail for all the ladies! (*Taking her hand.*) You, yourself, do not know how beautiful, how gentle, how lady-like you are!

[*Pressing her hand the while.*

LEAH (*snatching her hand away hastily*)
Tfui!
ZORACH
Why, Leah! Leah, don't take your hand away!
LEAH (*making an effort to restrain herself*)
What good is my hand to you?
ZORACH
I want it! (*Taking her hand forcibly.*) And I may, too. Nachama wouldn't say a word against it. You are my sister-in-law. My dear sister. If I want to I may even kiss you. (*He kisses her.* LEAH *hastily wipes her face and wants to scream, but restrains herself suddenly.*) Don't be cross, Leah. I am your brother-in-law, anyway. And, in truth, I love you very much indeed, Leah. When I kiss you it is just the same with me as if I kissed Nachama.
LEAH
The same?
ZORACH
Of course! Are you not sisters—of the same father and mother, of the same flesh and blood?
LEAH
Though we are so different, she, so lively, I, so quiet?
ZORACH
In spite of it, and perhaps because of it. Don't be mean, Leah!
[LEAH *is now thinking quickly, desperately.*
LEAH
What?
ZORACH
Be kind. Don't be cross.
LEAH
Of course, not—a sister and a brother-in-law—even if it is without a wedding! Very well. Neither of us are such pious souls, God forbid. Ha-ha-ha! On the contrary, do

you know what, Zorach? I have a request to make of you.

ZORACH

I should talk to that bastard for you?

LEAH

No, no. I have a favor to ask of you, yourself . . .

ZORACH

Of me?

LEAH

If you should ever be tempted, Zorach . . .

ZORACH (*nonplussed*)

What?

LEAH

Don't ruin her, Zorach. Run away from her . . . and . . .

ZORACH

And what, Leah? What?

LEAH

And come to me. . . . I am already—lost! Let me at least be a sacrifice for her. . . . You could love me a little sometime, Zorach?

[ZORACH—*breathless.*

CURTAIN

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